THE TANNER OF KIEV by WALLACE WEST

fantastic ADVENTURES

OCTOBER

25¢

CATS OF KADENZA

By RON WILCOX

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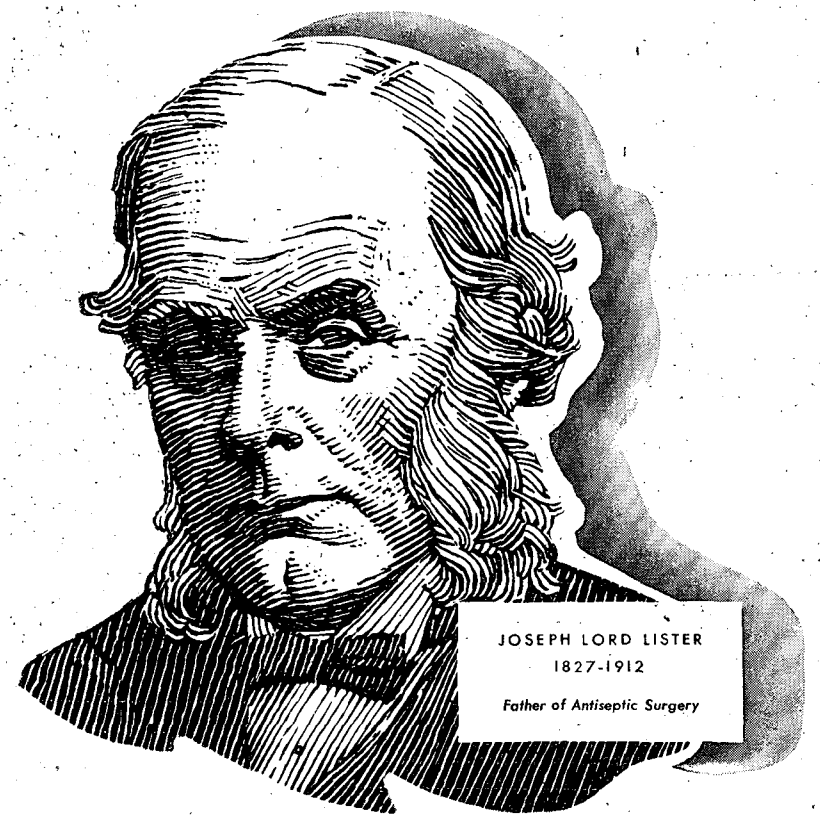

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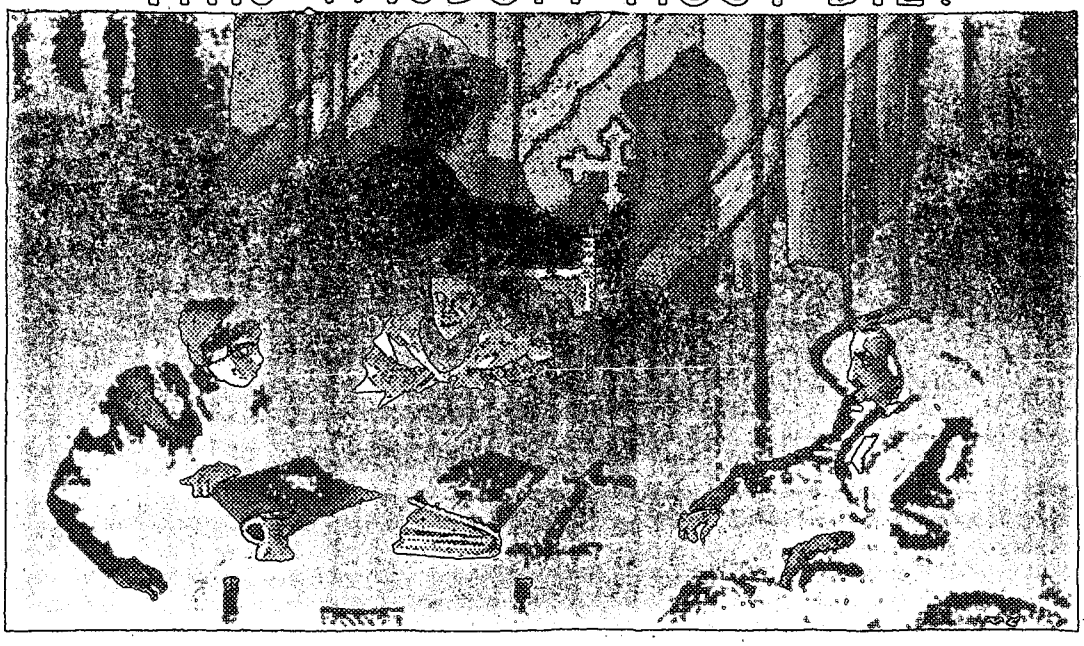

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OCTOBER
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Front cover painting by J. Allen St. John, illustrating a scene from "Cats of Kadenza"
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OCTOBER 1944

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VOLUME 6
NUMBER 4

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Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

ARE we permitted a little philosophy? Okay. When an editor looks at an author, he wants to determine the size of his shoes—so he observes the size of hat the author elects to wear. Be the hat an eleven, then the shoes are sixes; and vicy-vercy. Would you be surprised to know that each author on this month's contents page is there because we know the size of his hat and of his shoes? The philosophy? "The size of the shoes a man is capable of filling is in direct contrast to the size of the hat he chooses to wear."

NOW we'd better explain: First, some years ago a man came to our office and asked simply if we had anything he could write for. We had: our sister magazine, *Amazing Stories*. Perhaps the one thing that impressed us most at that first meeting was the size of this man's hat; it was fantastically small. We are referring, of course, to the size he *elected* to wear. To make a short story, this man's shoes turned out to the hugest ever to make their imprint in the ink of our pages. You'll find those prints in this issue again, bigger than ever. They are being worn by a guy named Don Wilcox.

SOMETIMES we hear the remark that an editor can make or break an author by the way he pushes him. We also hear it said that an author is what his editor makes of him. Both are true in one respect, and untrue in another. It is true that we built Don up over a period of years with what sometimes was almost Hollywoodian technique. But it is also true that he *lived up* to what we said! His hat remained small, and his shoes (the ones we *gave* him editorially) were consequently filled by the growth of his literary feet. He didn't let us down. You have no idea how proud that makes an editor.

"CATS OF KADENZA" in this issue is just another of Don Wilcox's stories—but we are as proud of it as of any he has ever written. We give it to you this month graced with every compliment we can possibly pay, and illustrated by a cover painted by an artist whose shoes are equally large. J. Allen St. John—the best for the best.

SO, IN picking stories for you, we work on the knowledge that no egotist can see other people in the perspective necessary to write well of them—and all our stories are stories of *people*. If a man is an egotist, he will never make a writer; because his characters must live and breathe even more realistically than himself. It takes real modesty to take a back seat to the "phantoms" of your own mind!

NOW, getting away from philosophy, let's briefly describe the other "big-shoe" authors in this issue; or rather, their stories. First is Berkeley Livingston's best to date, a little yarn called "Bat Out Of Hell" and if you draw any conclusions, let your embarrassment be upon your own head! This one's a "bat" story that's different!

OUR newest discovery, Miss Frances Deegan, who will astound you in months to come, presents "The Martian And The Milkmaid" which has the delicate, yet sharply pointed, satirical sarcasm of a woman hidden innocently behind its 5,500 words. We think you'll like it.

OLD Master Wallace West returns again with a Russian wartime folktale that will tickle your hearts. Just let yourself be a kid again, and have a real thrill. We might say that the goblins and witches and fairies of this piece are very real things to Russian children, and are as old as Russian history itself. "The Tanner Of Kiev" is on a par with Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs.

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS (size twelve shoes!) presents a novelet called "Martian Adventure." Here is one of those truly fantastic interplanetarys that are always something worth reading—and reading again. But then, Bob is always worth reading!

FIRST timer Lester Barclay gives us "I'll Be Seeing You" (illustrated by Finlay, you fans!) and a neat little yarn it is. We won't give you any hint about it, for fear we'll spoil things for you. The title means . . . well, it means I'll be seeing you!

"FAIR EXCHANGE" is no robbery! Miles Shelton has something unusual to our pages here, and we're anxious to get your reaction? You read the story, then write us a letter. Fair exchange?

LASTLY, "The Man Who Spoke Too Late" and how he spoke too late! But not too

(Concluded on page 8)

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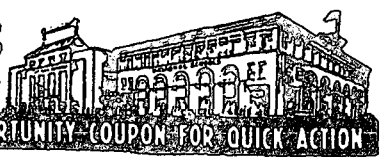

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(Concluded from page 6)

late to cause justice to be done. This was one truth that it didn't seem could ever out! William Lawrence Hamling put a nice idea into very few words here.

FOR you fans who have been lamenting, we still have quite a few very fine Finlay illustrations on hand! So keep right on being happy. All you have to do is get *Fantastic Adventures* and *Amazing Stories* regularly.

SOME of our readers have asked us, so here's the new schedule on Ziff-Davis pulps. All three are quarterly, and they alternate. This (October) issue of *Fantastic Adventures* appears in July; *Mammoth Detective* (November) appears in August; and *Amazing Stories* (December) appears in September. Then we repeat, all over again. One magazine a month. Just call at your newsstand each month and you'll be okay.

IT'S a little hard to write something so prosaic as an editorial to a fantastic adventure magazine when the most fantastic adventure of them all is popping all over western France. If you've read some of the *news* stories on the events of D-day, and at the same time haven't thought of exactly the same sort of descriptions in *fantasy* stories of the past, you just must give up your memory as a hopelessly useless instrument! How could any scene, even in fiction, be as unearthly and as tremendous, and as ficitional in appearance as the actual scenes that D-day unfolded before the eyes of all observers?

YOUR editor has cause to remember with even more poignancy than others—because he has before him a letter dated November 1, 1922 from a certain science fiction magazine editor. It was a "rejection slip" for a story detailing a war of the future. It said: "You certainly laid it on thick! I'm afraid our readers would never find any credence in your future battle scenes—you've got more machines and crazy contraptions than the mind can grasp. No, future wars will not depart so drastically from today's military technique. When you speak of thousands of warships shooting thousands of tons of shells at a coastline they can't even see; which is at the same time being assaulted by more thousands of planes (each carrying the incredible amount of a *ton* of bombs!) armed with *cannon;* while still other thousands of planes, carrying twenty men each, deposit whole divisions by parachute on the same area, you are certainly creating a mess! I'm afraid your sea forces would shoot down your aerial forces, and your parachutists would be dead before they hit the ground! No, even science fiction must be a little reasonable." Your editor hopes and prays that that same editor is reading today's news stories and choking on his teeth! Incidentally, we were so depressed by that rejection letter we tore the story to bits and tossed it into the waste basket!

AND now, you lovers of fantasy, sit up in your chairs and listen! We're going to give you a tip on something very very fine, and if you miss it, it'll be your fault entirely. All of you who have followed this type of fiction with any fervor will recognize the name of David V. Reed, and also recognize that a story written by him is bound to be one of the very finest. Reed, we'll say without hesitation, is the most truly *brilliant* writer in the field of fantasy today. Also, he writes with the flash and ability of a Hemingway and the completeness of a Tolstoy. Well, recently he wrote a story for us which *might* have gone into *Fantastic Adventures.* It is called "The Metal Monster Murders," and it has a very strong element of fantasy. But it is, essentially, a mystery story, and therefore belongs in *Mammoth Detective.* But even if you don't read mystery stories, get the next issue (November) of *Mammoth Detective,* on sale August 16! You will find this new 92,000 word novel one that'll go on your list of classics. And we think you'll find that your love for fantasy will be more than satisfied. We believe we're doing you a personal favor when we warn you to *reserve* that issue at your newsstand—because if you don't, you might not be able to get a copy. And that, quite frankly, would be a damned shame!

MAYBE you've noticed we've discontinued our "back issues" corner. Well, reason is simple —there are no back issues left. War paper shortages have made them collectors' items.

ANOTHER thing that is being discontinued is the "readers prize corner." It was instituted on a theory of your editor that it would stimulate fan mail. Your editor is *so* smart. The fact is, you readers write in because *you* want to, and you'll write without any artificial stimulus. Thanks to you readers who've explained this to us.

SPEAKING of collectors items, Mark Reinsberg told us recently that one of the rarest of all items is a book called "The Weinbaum Memorial" or "Dawn of Flame" or something like that. Well, we just got a letter from a fan who has eight copies for sale—and the bidding starts, he says, at $15.00 per copy. Anything you want as badly as all that, your editor is glad to pass on to you. We'll forward all communications from interested readers.

Which brings us to the end of the notebook for this issue. Until next time we'll be praying for our boys in France. *Rap.*

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CATS OF KADENZA

By DON WILCOX

Black intrigue was taking place in Kadenza. Were the skulls behind it all, or the cats—or the Princess Muriel?

MEET my friend, Lenzono, the King of Kadenza.

Kadenza, if you haven't heard of such a kingdom before, is to be found only on globes of three feet or more in diameter, and is usually outlined in a boundary of purple with a little rectangle marked in dotted lines in the northeast corner, where the King has set aside fifty thousand acres of forest for his citizens. In this natural park they may do all the hunting they wish, either for four-legged animals or two-, as long as they use spears or darts or bows-and-arrows, but not firearms of any sort.

King Lenzono has had an aversion to guns, I may explain to you in confi-

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She said coolly: "It won't take us long to reach an understanding. The skulls say you're plotting to kill me"

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dence, ever since he was in a duel forced upon him by a hot-blooded prince from a neighboring state. The King had what he considered the bad fortune to kill said prince with the first bullet, carefully aimed—an incident which left him in possession of a ruby-studded trophy and this aforementioned hatred of all firearms.

The King's name is much too long to be given in full, and it would lead to those time-consuming speculations upon his ancestry, legitimate and otherwise, among numerous ancient families of European and Asiatic noblemen. Suffice it to say that the archives supply this sparkling information: he is sometimes called, not "Lenzono the Great" or "Lenzono the Magnificent" or "Lenzono the Lionhearted"—but "Lenzono the Jumpy."

Which discovery was the beginning of my ten-thousand-mile voyage that brought me, one peaceful September afternoon, to the one-hundred-and-forty-first step of King Lenzono's palace.

If this sudden leap around the globe sounds a trifle extravagant, let me explain that I was an employee of one of those richly endowed research foundations which blossomed soon after the end of the Second World War. As a highly successful collector of seashells, egg shells and nut shells, I had held this portfolio of research ever since my twenty-fifth birthday, which is to say, approximately two weeks—time enough to study the three-foot globe, pack my bags, and make the leisurely hop to Kadenza.

Two small boys who were looking through the fence outside the palace assured me that this diminutive man on the hundred-and-forty-first step in the cream colored suit with the orange sash, and the propeller-blade mustaches and goatee, was His Majesty, Lenzono the Jumpy. And so, a scant one hundred jumps later (I started up two at a time—definitely a mistake) I was at the summit of said stairs shaking the hand of said King.

"Jumpy" was correct. Lenzono jumped away from me even as he was greeting me. That is to say, while he shook my hand he was looking into the tall tree that I had dodged on the way up. He looked so intently that I looked, too.

THE King's first words that I can recall were, "Do I see a cat in that tree?"

"Is there supposed to be a cat in that tree?"

"There should be a cat keeping guard over these steps," said the King, "and if the cat hasn't walked off or gone to sleep I don't see how you got in."

"It's the first time I ever heard of cats keeping guard over a King's palace," I said. "Or maybe you aren't the King."

The King thereupon pulled a zipper on his left shoulder and revealed a flamboyant tattoo—the coat-of-arms of the royal family of Kadenza. Then he pulled a zipper on the right shoulder and there were the tattooed letters:

LENZONO, KING OF KADENZA

In return for this courtesy I presented my card establishing me as a citizen of America and the roving researcher of several institutions too well known to be mentioned in private papers of this sort. It was America, not the institutions, which impressed him. His mustache ends turned up with pleasure.

"You know about Hollywood? About Broadway? Ah, I have many things to ask you. Come in. Don't mind all these courtesans and overstuffed doormen. Just put your arm through mine and we'll walk right past them."

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He came to an abrupt stop under the doorway with his pleasant ahs!—and again he turned to look at the tree. For the next four minutes (by my watch) he gazed into the tree, and when he said "Alas! no cats!" he turned to me, and twisting his sharply waxed mustaches, said, "Where have I seen you before?"

"I'm from America, and I think I'll go right back."

"Oh! America! I must talk with you. I started to talk with someone from America just recently—Ah, but it was *you!* Strange, I can't remember a word we said."

"We haven't talked about anything," I said. "I just arrived here by plane, and you were about to take me into your studio—"

"A splendid idea. I couldn't think of a better one myself. But where is this studio you speak of?"

"Not mine—yours!" I grabbed him by the arm and tried to hold his eye long enough to put across one simple idea. "See here, Your Majesty, I'm from America. I've come to see you. You and I have things to tell each other. Now if you'll please forget all the trifles that are disturbing you and take me into some quiet room in your palace—"

By George, he had me doing it. I stopped right in the middle of a sentence and looked back at that freakish tree with its huge rubbery branches spreading in all directions in front of the chalky-white palace facade.

"The cat is there," the King exclaimed. "I *see* the cat. Now everything's all right!"

"Everything's perfect," I echoed. "The cat is there, unquestionably."

"Don't you see it?"

"Er—I think so," I hesitated. "Yes, I'm sure—"

"No, you're not seeing anything. It's on the other side of the trunk, fifth branch up, silhouetted perfectly."

"By George, I do see it." And by George, I did—no kidding. The best way to describe it is to say it looked like any other cat in a tree, except for the knowing look it gave me. And the gesture. It cocked its head, lifted its right paw to its right eye, and gave me a precise military salute. Then its tail motioned us to go on our way.

"Everything's all right," said the King, and he took me by the arm and led me into his palace.

CHAPTER II

Kadenza Boloney

"WHAT do you know about phrenology?" the King asked.

"Well, I'm for it, if that's any help."

"You'll admit that a man's character can be analyzed from the shape of his head and the features of his face?"

"To a certain extent—"

"Did you ever have your head examined?"

"What is this? A test of my sanity? No, I've never been—oh, you mean for character study. Let's see. Yes, to tell the truth, I did. Once in an employment agency."

"Good! Do you recall the circumstances?"

"Well, it was a case of this agent trying to figure out whether I could be put to work at candling eggs or do better at laying tile."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. If he analyzed you correctly I know his answer."

"Shoot."

"He said you were up to both jobs, but the tile-laying would be preferable, because you're not quite so quick at judgments as a good egg candler has to be. As an egg candler you'd be too conscientious, and after all there must

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be a few borderline eggs that make even the expert candlers look twice."

"You're hitting close as far as you've gone. But there was something more—"

"Your trustworthiness?"

"How did you know?"

"Because," said the King, "one needs to be trustworthy in either job. After the tile is laid and covered, no one will know whether you did a careless job. They have to take their tiles on trust—and the same, need I add, with candled eggs."

"And you would consider me to be—"

"Exceedingly trustworthy."

"We're going to get along just fine," I said. For it so happened that this blessing of faith which the King had vested in me was diametrically opposed to my former phrenological analysis: that I had all the prerequisites for tile-laying or egg candling *except* trustworthiness.

"We're going to get along just fine," the King echoed. "How long will you stay with me?"

"Until I get enough material for an article—maybe a book. I'm sure the reading public of America will be interested in your private life."

"Ha, ha, ha. You flatter me," said the King, plowing his delicate hands through his wavy brown hair. "I am on the rim—I should say, the brink of an adventure. Tonight at midnight I lock myself in the inner room of my palace, not to be disturbed by the sound of a human voice for two full weeks."

"Two weeks? How do you expect to live?"

"See yonder porters carting foods down the hallway? I'm making preparations for a prolonged siege of solitary confinement."

As an adventure this appealed to me about as much as a semester in Sing Sing; in fact, much less, for there is at least some constructive social life at Sing Sing.

"If you don't mind, I'll come back later," I said, and began to consider how I might while away some fourteen days in this corner of the globe where there were no world series, bathing-beauty contests or radio quiz programs.

"You are must too trusting, Mr. Trent. I can see that you are not even the amateur phrenologist that I am or you would think twice before placing such implicit trust in me."

"You mean you're just giving me a line of Kadenza boloney?"

"Come, let us close the door."

WE WERE inside this inner room of his, I should judge . . . his inner suite of offices and hobby rooms. In the adjoining alcove I could see innumerable pictures on the walls, up into the skylighted dome of the arch: and, heaven help me, they were pictures of cats—cats dancing, cats marching, cats standing on their heads, cats reading books on nature, cats sitting on tops of skulls!

This was too much. Why did I ever let myself in for a visit to this weird jungle of cats?

The King closed the door. "You see I'm going to trust you with the direst secret. I wouldn't dare let anyone in my kingdom know . . . for as your great writer Shakespeare has observed, "any great state is on the verge of collapse."

Cats, phrenology, solitude, and now Shakespeare. I gulped, blurting out, "Just what, Your Majesty, is your chief interest in life?"

"Acting," said the King. "That's what I brought you in to tell you about. Tonight at midnight I go forth *to act!*"

"How ducky! Two weeks of acting in the solitude of yon—"

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"Ah, but that is only a ruse. I won't be here. I'll be away. Everyone will think I'm here behind locked doors. Actually I'll be out in the great forest pursuing my lessons in the art of acting."

"You mean incognito?"

"That's the very word. Are you with me?"

Well, that was different. I must admit that my interest in this little pint-sized King multiplied several fold in that moment. Maybe he was up to an adventure of some sort after all.

"Hold on," I said. "What about all that food you're having them stock in your cell?"

"Only a part of my ruse, Mr. Trent—"

"Ed'll do. My pals call me Eddie."

"Eddie it is. How soon will you be ready to start?"

"At midnight."

"Good. Then I'll meet you at the Bamboo hamburger stand at twenty minutes to twelve.'

"It's a deal. Shall I have them wrap up a couple of dozen hamburgers to go?"

"A splendid idea. And you do have some money, I trust—of course, you're an American. All right, that takes care of everything but the final item. You'd better get a haversack to carry it in."

"What is *it?*"

"A skull," said the King. "A human skull. That's all. I'll meet you. Here, come this way. You follow right down that walk, and don't forget to salute the cat on your way out."

A skull, he said. This Kadenza boloney was giving me indigestion. For two cents I'd have boarded my plane and written a report of my research that could have been summarized in three words: "Lenzono is looney."

In fact, as I walked down the hundred and forty-one steps I vowed I'd do just that—unless that cat gave me a salute that I was certain wasn't a mirror trick.

The cat saluted.

At twenty minutes to twelve I met the King, his face so clean-shaven that I hardly recognized him. Gone were the waxed mustaches and the sharp goatee, and now you could see all the mirth lines around his mouth, curved upward in a smile.

I was fully equipped with a haversack containing two dozen hamburgers and a skull.

CHAPTER III

Spree Incognito

"DID you have any trouble getting the skull?" the King asked.

We were rolling along in a taxi—the latest teardrop model—and I glanced through the rear window to make sure the road was clear; sometimes one will get that feeling that he's being followed or observed, and nothing will shake it.

"Come, come," said the King. "Don't be worried. My disguise is perfect. What about the skull? You do have it, don't you?"

"I went to the museum."

"I don't understand."

"You'd be surprised how resourceful I can be in a pinch," I said. "Doesn't my face or head bumps reveal that? Well, here's what I did. I went into the museum with fifteen cents' worth of fireworks and this."

I held up a small gadget. The King studied it for a moment.

"Not a glass cutter?"

"Exactly. While the fireworks caused a commotion in one corner of the room, I was at the cases in the other corner exercising my skill. The glass broke clean, I fitted it against the other side of the case, reached in through the

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opening and lifted my skull—I mean *the* skull."

"Remarkable. I thought I might have to send you on that errand to a cemetery. Very good, we're all fixed . . . Must you keep looking back?"

"It's a habit, Your Majesty."

"Oh, ho," said the King. "Where'd that cat come from?"

Almost before I could take in the horrified look on the king's face I heard a wailing meeow; and there in his hand was a gray tom-cat with green eyes and enough strength in his forepaws to put up a terrific scrap. There was a moment of high-powered clawing before the King got matters under control. Control, in this case, consisted of getting a good grip on the nape of the cat's neck and thrusting it through the open window.

But the King didn't let go. The cat dangled from his clutching hand all the way to the east bridge of the royal par', and there our chauffeur, as per instructions, drove close enough to the rail to enable the King to complete his action. One swift swing of the arm and the cat went out into space, clawing the air, crying waa-waa-waa all the way down.

"Let it drown and be damned," I said. "I never did like stowaways."

I had a suspicion that the cat wouldn't drown, but I thought the King might feel better if he thought it would. So we rode on in silence for a time, and I knew he was worrying over what happened.

"That wasn't the same cat that guarded the palace, of course," I said. "Or was it?"

"It was a spy," said the King. "I should have killed it outright. And still—you never know, do you?"

"You certainly don't," I said, feeling that it was the most accurate comment I could possibly have made. "How do you think it got onto us?"

"It's a spy—a palace spy. Somebody's luring cats our way and it has found its way through the guard."

"If I'm not overstepping the bounds of propriety, I think a few dogs standing guard might solve your problem. I remember a dog we had back in Memphis—"

"Dogs are no good," said the King. "They don't catch all the impressions like cats. Don't ask me why—but take my word for it—that cat that rode with us overheard everything we said."

A chilly silence caught me, and all I could do for the next mile was to cast suspicious glances at the King when I thought he wasn't looking—but he was, every time. And suddenly he broke out laughing.

"I couldn't tell it and keep a straight face, damn it!" He was buckling up with laughter.

"So you've ben stringing me again—"

"Not that," he replied, becoming serious. "It *is* a funny thing, now, isn't it? I was as amazed when I first heard it as the cat must have been when it struck the water. Now, get me straight, Eddie. I was trying to hold back my laugh because its practice. I'm trying to learn to act. I burn to act—I dream of acting—I would almost throw over my throne and my kingdom to be one of your Hollywood —no, I won't put it that strong. But anyhow, when I get a chance to tell something that is sure to make the unsuspecting lose his grip on his wits trying to fathom it, what could challenge my acting ability any more than trying to tell it with a sober face? I knew you'd fly into a panic and think I'm a hair-brained son-of-a-nobleman. But I'm not."

"Are you trying to tell me you believe—"

"Exactly what I said—that the cat

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stowaway picked up every word we said."

"Please!"

"I'll explain as soon as there's a chance. You'll pardon me, but I'm allowing myself to become so hilarious over your personification of flabbergastation—ah, I've coined a word—"

"You didn't finish your sentence—that what?"

"That our chauffeur is probably listening, too." He called up front. "Are you, Doris?"

The chauffeur's cap turned around and the pretty girl under it said, "How could I help it, Your Majesty?"

I gasped. "Now who in the name of Kadenza is she?"

"Miss Jastrow," said the King, "allow me to present my new friend, Eddie Trent. Eddie's from America. He knows all about Hollywood. He's come across to get a story about me. So I thought we might as well give him a real treat."

"Why not?" said Doris Jastrow, and she gave me a curious look that turned into a smile and lasted a little too long. But she backed us right out of the hedge and we turned the corner and were on our way again.

"All right, Your Majesty," I said. "You decided I was trustworthy, and so I believed you when you said there wasn't a single subject in your kingdom who knew you were off on this incognito. I'm much too trusting, I'm afraid."

"We pause for a few corrections," said the King. "In the first place, my phrenological observation was not that you were trusting, but trustworthy yourself. There is a difference. All right; you've taken my word for it that I can trust you. But halt! Should you take my word? My own phrenology—and this is in the second place, if you're keeping count—is that I am not too trustworthy. So how do you know I wasn't lying to you in the first place?"

"In the third place," Doris Jastrow's voice rose from a distressed whine into a near screech, "who brought up all these places? Stop it!"

"In the fourth place—"

"Stop it!"

"Miss Jastrow—Doris dear," the King cooed. Then he turned to me, "I'm only acting. Miss Jastrow has given me practice in saying 'my dear'—are your nerves on edge over the hazards of this adventure?"

"I saw the headline," said Doris.

"What headline, Doris Deeear?"

"The latest," said Doris. "The kingdom will rock with it tomorrow."

The King shrugged. "So bad as that? Or is it good? Or should I worry? I'm off on a jaunt."

"Your nation's off on a jolt."

THE King turned to me. "Now what could she mean by that?"

I was still hung up in the network of "places" from two minutes and two miles back. "That fourth place, Your Majesty?"

"In the fourth place," said the King, "I didn't deceive you at all when I said none of my subjects knew about this spree incog. Miss Jastrow is from Denver, Colorado—"

"Denver!"

"I think it's a mountain town over in your country somewhere. Probably peasants in bright colors, mountain yodelers, sheep herding—"

"You'd be surprised," said Doris.

"Anyway, she's a splendid actress, yodeler and dancer, and I'm very lucky I could hire her to help me act. She's almost as good as the cleverest cats I've ever seen."

"He insists on comparing me with cats," said Doris. "I've come half way around the world to be exposed to cato-

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mania. It's catching, you know. Don't stick around or you'll have it, too."

While Doris gave me this warning the King turned his eyes to the newsstand at a brightly lighted village corner that we were sweeping through, and was reminded of the headline.

"What was that headline, Doris? You forgot to tell me."

"You forgot to ask. It's a scoop about the King."

"Who? Me?" the King screeched.

"Your Majesty, may I suggest that this is an ideal time," said Doris coolly, "for you to put into practice your acting techniques. What have I taught you?"

"Turn around!" the King shouted. "You've got to go back. There's something wrong."

"Don't shout that way. You'll ruin your voice. Shout this way if you must—"

"I'll shout any way I please. Turn around, I command you! There's something rotten in Kadenza!"

Doris spun us around so fast that the King's gurgle was swallowed up.

At the village corner we did another swift U-turn, so that we were again headed for the forest as the King caught a glimpse of the front page. The headline shrieked:

EXTRA! EXTRA!
RUMOR: KING ABSCONDS

CHAPTER IV

Bound for the Tall Timber

THE King was not quite himself for the next five miles. He was too busy laughing himself into a state of hysterics.

"The forest, James, the forest!"

"Take it easy, take it easy," Doris Jastrow said.

She could have been talking to herself, the way she was slurring the corners. We were skirting the edge of the forest now, and the points of the trees would stick out into our roadway like giant hedges across the road. Just when we'd almost plunge through them, there'd be a sharp curve, and we'd swish around it and straighten out a bridge, ripping our teardrop sides against the overhanging leaves and bouncing over a hill. Then I'd finish swallowing, seeing that we were back on the beam.

It was a weird party, any way you look at it—with me clutching my skull and hamburgers, the girl driving like mad, and the King laughing like an idiot.

"What makes it so funny? I never could see anything humorous about a King absconding."

"I'm locked up for two weeks," said Lenzono the Jumpy. "They'll have to wait till I come out before they know whether I'm gone." And he was off again. Did you ever hear one of those stage comedians with a laugh that starts on middle C and thumps up the scale like a woodpecker running up a xylophone? That was the King. Two octaves up, he'd hit the top note and hang on for fifteen eek-eek-eeks and run out of breath. Then you'd hold your breath waiting to hear something more out of him; and you'd think he was gone this time for sure. Then, "Whee-ee-ee!" and he'd sail down the scale like a seasick trombone and be ready to start all over again.

"They'll have to wait till I come out—"

I cut him short. "They won't wait. If they think you've absconded they'll bust in and see. Isn't that so, Doris?"

"It sure is," said Doris, "that's why I'm driving wide open."

"I don't get it," said the King.

"Simple as A.B.C.," I said. "A,

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they've got suspicions you're not hiding in your room after all. B, they want to know what you're up to. C, they've invented this desertion rumor so they'll have an excuse to break in."

The King's laughter was six miles long. He croaked, "What's D?"

"D, they find you're gone," I said, "and E, they notify your highway police to stop all cars."

"F?" the Kink yelped. "They'll find me and I won't get my vacation!"

"And G, we'll be hanged for kidnaping," I mumbled.

"Gee!" Doris gasped.

"No, no—don't worry about that. My country is humane," said the King. "I'll promise you lethal gas."

"It's H to pay, anyway you look at it," I said.

"Look out, Your Majesty!" Doris yelled. "Here comes F!"

A motorcycle squad swung in from a side-road to give us a siren escort of the spine-chilling variety. Seems we'd been loafing along at ninety or a hundred up to that time. Now Doris got down to the serious business of prodding the foot-feed.

"You'll never do it," the King wailed. "They're the fastest things on wheels."

"I'm doing a hundred and thirty," said Doris.

"Make it forty," said the King. "They're gaining on us."

"They don't know who you are, do they?"

"Only that we're a Capital City taxi," said the King.

"Look out for those trees!" I yelled.

SWISH—swooie—around the curve and back on the beam. I think we skipped the bridge altogether. Looking through the back glass, I saw the six motorcycles hit the high spots. They leaned to the curve and were right on our tails.

"Kadenza river ahead!" the King shouted. "It's quite a curve."

"Where?" Doris squealed.

"About two miles ahead."

"Then I'd better start turning. How close are they?"

"Crawling on our tail lights," I yelled. "Turn sharp and shake 'em."

"Impossible," said the King. "They're the best. What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna give 'em a treat."

I rolled down the rear window and opened my haversack so I could get to the hamburgers.

"What are you going to do? Feed them?"

"I hope," I said, "there's plenty of ketchup on these 'burgers," and then I dropped them, from left to right, numbers one to twenty-four respectively. They spatted down right in front of the on-coming motorcycles just as the whole high-speed parade hit the curve.

And who made the bend at one hundred and thirty per? We did.

And who didn't?

They didn't. They went hamburger-skidding straight for the river, and my only regrets were that we were going to fast to hear the splash.

"They'll join the cat somewhere downstream," I said.

Then the King said, "That cat has already reported to the palace or this wouldn't have happened."

Doris didn't feel like slowing down, but the road was getting thicker with forest, and our teardrop model was unquestionably beginning to take on scars from all the branches and young trees we had chopped off. The King had an idea.

"I'll get into my bag of disguises and make myself over so if anyone else stops us they'll see we don't have a king with us. I'll be—what shall I be? A tramp? I think I'd make a very good tramp?"

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"Your courtly manners would give you away."

"Remember, I'm an actor."

"All right, you're a tramp, and I'm the officer who stops this car," I said, "and I give you the cold eye and ask you if you know what happened to the missing king. What do you say?"

"Who? Me? Am I missing? Are they sure? Have they looked in my room to see, or are they out searching to prove their suspicion without looking in?"

"See here, tramp, I'm looking in at you. We've got a suspicion the King has absconded. He's a five-footer and wiry, about like you. You know anything about him? Answer up?"

THE King tried to think of something to say, and he made a dreadful out of it. He said, "Ahem!" like an insulted magistrate, and reached to twist the corners of his moustaches that weren't there.

"No, no. You'd sink yourself like a ton of lead."

The girl spoke up to take the King's part. "Give him a chance. He wants to learn to act. All he needs is practice and he'll be a first-rate tramp. He's got what it takes."

The king swelled up his chest, then his eyebrows shot up with doubt, but he decided to be pleased.

I argued them down on this tramp plan. There wouldn't be any more acting if he played a false move and had to chase back to the palace to dam up dangerous rumors.

"Well, Mr. Smarty," said Doris to me, "what do you suggest?"

"There is one act he could play and get away with it, good manners at all."

"I'll do it," said the King. "Anything for an incognito. What is it? Name it."

"Chauffeur," I said, and he swallowed it—hook, line and sinker. I felt a little guilty over playing so cunningly upon his weakness for acting; but I argued with myself that it would be safer than letting him make a botch of playing tramp, and secondly, it was high time that Doris and I had the back seat to ourselves and get acquainted.

A very cozy arrangement; and the evening was balmy—as the songwriter might add.

CHAPTER V

I Borrow the Bacon

"EYES front, chauffeur," I said to the King every time he started to turn around and say something.

"Very good, sir," he said. He was doing a swell job of acting the stiff-necked chauffeur. "About this speed, sir?"

"Not too fast, James, now that we're out of danger."

"Very good, sir."

That fixed everything. It was the right kind of scenery for this time of night: the trees were black, the sky was black and the mountains were black. There was nothing to be seen but the colorless road swinging into the glare of our headlights as we rode deeper and deeper into the forest.

"Doris Jastrow, you're the loveliest girl I ever met," I said. "I'm crazy about you. Marry me!"

"Your sense of timing is remarkable," she said, smiling a little as if she thought I was kidding.

"I'll admit I'm a little slow getting around to it," I said. "I should have put the King at the wheel when you first drove up. Would you prefer orange blossoms or just a simple wedding—daisies, maybe?"

"When I marry a man I don't know any better than I know you, I'll wear thistles," she said.

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I pondered on this and decided a girl like Doris Jastrow would look well in thistles, crab grass, cockleburs or poison ivy. When I told her so she gave me the poison ivy look.

"Just what are you doing here?" Her lips were pretty when she asked questions and kept looking at you, waiting for an answer.

"I'm writing up Lenzono the Jumpy. Don't tell me you're here on the same assignment?"

"No," she said. "You've picked a prize night to get next to him."

"Could you elaborate slightly upon that NO?"

"No, I'm not here to write up the King."

"Thanks," I said. In spite of her vagueness she'd told me something in her revised version of NO. A peculiar accent on the word King, sounded very much as if she had come to write up something else.

Well, well, well, thinks I...Could there be within the space of this small kingdom anything besides Lenzono the Jumpy worth writing up? The answer —let the mountains give echo and the forests join the refrain—is YES.

There was an old broken-down temple somewhere in the middle of this forest, and we were moving into the general vicinity of its hiding place—but I knew nothing of that on this night.

All I knew was that Doris Jastrow was one of the most attractive girls I'd ever proposed to. Some day Eddie Trent would get downright serious about a gal like that and go so far as to enlarge the offer to include furs and diamonds and Bermuda—or Kadenza—why not? Ideal spot for a honeymoon. A little costly from America, but as long as I could travel on an expense account —wake up, Eddie Trent! Land Doris Jastrow and the honeymoon's practically paid for! Ah, romance!

THE dawn came up in the west presently, which proved that I'd lost all sense of direction. The King said it was north, and Doris called it south, so we decided to stop at the lighted cabin up the road and ask the points of the compass and see whether we could buy some fresh eggs and a pound of bacon.

"I have an idea," said the King.

"You're going to pretend you're a tramp," said Doris.

"She's psychic," said the King. "Give me my bag of disguises."

"That's no way to get breakfast," I warned. "Maybe you'll get a handout, but what about us?"

"If I act the perfect tramp," said the King, "I'll not fail to observe the way to the hen-house...Ah, how do I look?"

"A little more stubble on your cheeks. And remember, don't twist your mustaches." Doris kept advising him with do's and don'ts as she made him up. He had a goodly quantity of uncontrolled stagefright, for all he was just going to tackle the society of a pair of backwoods residents. He tried a few speeches on us to give his uneducated enunciations a warm-up. He was dressed for the part: his overalls had the patches and his black shirt had the proper degree of stickiness. For this occasion he hadn't bothered to change socks, and they were the royal orange and white. But we agreed that his overalls would keep them covered.

"Wait a minute. There's a split in your shoulder," said Doris. "You're tattoo shows." She pinned him up.

He started off, then came running back. "I just thought of something. What'll I say if someone calls me 'Your Majesty?"

"Crawl back in the car," I said, "before you give yourself away."

"Oh, that's right, they won't—how absurd!" He took on one of his laughing sprees.

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"Stop it," said Doris. "If you're going into this thing, you've got to use your heard every minute. You won't have any ministers and advisors around you telling you what to do all the time, like Broko Blue back in the palace—"

"Right you are." He started to twist a mustache. "Oh, oh. There I go."

"There he goes," said Doris, as we watched him marching away — not trudging or limping or staggering or lazying along, but marching, like a King's guard, straight for the front door of the house.

We were parked about a hundred yards away, and the shrubbery hid our car well enough, and gave us a leafy view of the cabin. The woodsman was coming in from some early morning errand at the rear of the house and he stopped to gather up an armful of kindling. He straightened up when he saw the King, and we'd have given an American dollar apiece to know what the conversation was all about.

The next thing we knew the King was put to work with an ax at the woodpile.

"It's my turn to have an idea," said Doris. "While I catch a nap you slip around to the hen-house and collect the efforts of the early morning cacklers. When you come back we'll build a campfire and make up for lost hamburgers."

MY theory is that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and whenever a girl offers to fry eggs for you, it's a score for Cupid. The least I could do was to venture forth and exercise my shell-collecting talents. I returned a half hour later, and, by George, Doris had a campfire going.

"Eggs?" she asked pleasantly. "Eggs on two, up and over?"

"You can say that again," I said, "and again and again, after the orange blossoms."

"Don't change the subject," she said. "Why, you have a frying pan! And bacon!"

"You see, the family was outside teaching a tramp how to swing an ax, so I slipped in and helped myself."

"Noble! And three eggs? That third one's awfully white."

"It's China. In case the King comes back hungry. That's put his acting to a test."

"You're cruel," said Doris. "He's very sweet. He's a little overwrought, as anyone would be, trying to perform the duties of a king when he really wants to be an actor. Do you know what I think the King wants to do?"

I couldn't have answered that one if there'd been sixty-four dollars on it.

"I think," Doris said, rolling her pretty blue eyes at the column of smoke, "that he wants to become one of Hollywood's greatest actors."

"Impossible! He's got his hands full being King."

"I know it. Tonight just goes to show that he has too many palace troubles ever to get away. But that doesn't keep him from wanting to be the world's greatest actor."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. Think how much determination it takes to do what he's doing. He's been working for years to get everything set so he could leave his throne for this vacation. With a neighbor kingdom snarling and threatening from the south, that hasn't been an easy thing to do."

"But talent? Determination is one thing—the stuff it takes is another. He's the jumpiest critter outside a racing stable I ever saw. How are you going to discipline a set of nerves like that into being an actor?"

Doris blew the smoke out of her eyes and considered. "I know. You think he's helpless. But I don't. You see he

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not only has nerves, he has nerve. Look at him swinging that ax. He's hurling himself right into the thick of things. The way he's going he'll force himself to act. Out here in the forest is the place to start. He won't have so many observers."

"Not so many, but they'll be sharper," I said. "These backwoodsmen are shrewd and suspicious, you know. He'd have had a better chance of obscurity on the busiest street in the city."

Doris shrugged. She passed the frying pan over to me, and I picked out some of its delicacies with my pocketknife, cooled them, then fed them to her.

"There's another reason, Eddie," she said, "that the King chose this time and place for his incog. There's someone out in this vicinity from Hollywood. He's exploring this forgotten little kingdom for the same reason we are: because there are unusual things here that will look bright and interesting to Americans when they're put in story or movie."

"Who is he?"

"The mysterious Mr. Holly from Hollywood. Have you heard of him?"

"Isn't he the man with a reputation for all those weird pictures?"

"Right. He's a writer. He has an in. He's here for what Kadenza has to offer, and he's camping out here in this forest. He secured permission from the King to set up his exits and entrances out here in the woods where he could piece together a brand new play without any disturbance from Hollywood reporters or drama gossips."

"Now I've got your number," I said.

"Wrong again. I didn't come here for a story on the mysterious Mr. Holly."

"Then what in the name of Kadenza are you after?"

"For the present," said Doris Jastrow, giving me a baffling wink, "let's say I'm here to study the care and feeding of cats."

CHAPTER VI

The Royal Actor's Ax

IT WAS twenty-two minutes after six a. m. when I downed the last of our breakfast. When something alarming like a gun-shot occurs, I always check my watch; you never know, you might be called to the witness-stand, and it pays to have the facts. At 6:22 a.m. an airplane went over, half a mile up, and I said to Doris, "There goes trouble," and she replied, "It's from the palace. There's a search on."

We smothered our campfire with dirt and ran the car deeper into the woods and tossed dead brush over the tracks. From the sound of the wood-chopping, the King of Kadenza was thoroughly engrossed in playing tramp, oblivious of the plane. That was good. If he didn't want to be discovered, the safest thing for the present was to stay put.

"How," I said to Doris, "do they know the King isn't in the palace? Have they disobeyed his orders and broken in on suspicion. And if so, why? Can't a king break away for a secret vacation without being accused of absconding?"

"I'll guess with you," said Doris. "But here's something that will help. There's someone in that palace who is anxious to put His Majesty under suspicion. Don't ask me who the vulture is. I've only been here a week longer than you. I could be wrong."

I drew some conclusions of my own. "King Lenzono knows he has an enemy in the palace. That's why he fixed things so no one would know he left—"

"There goes the plane again," said Doris. "They're combing the roads, all right."

"As I was saying: A, the King expect-

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ed everyone to think he was still on the job; however, B, the villain had a hint—"

"How'd you know his initial was B?"

"Who?"

"The villain. Didn't you say 'B, the villain'?"

"I didn't mean to 'B' the villain—"

"Who's accusing you?" asked Doris. "I know you're not the villain. "You're innocent, pure and simple."

"I beg your pardon." I glared at her, daring her to call me simple, and she declared she hadn't and that I'd got her all mixed up, and would I go back to B and start over.

"When you said 'B the villain' you meant Broko Blue at the palace," she said. "I got that much. Now go on from there."

"Broko Blue?"

"The King's minister that feeds all the pet cats. Now that you've mentioned him—"

"Me—I—er, yes, what about him?" The fact was, I'd never heard of the guy.

"Well, he is the one that's making trouble for the King. I'm sure of it. If for no other reason, because he's the one that feeds the cats."

"Now we're getting places," I said. "What do you think the cats have to do with it?"

"They carry messages somehow. Don't ask me how—but you know we had an eavesdropper in the car when we first started out. And that's why the palace put the police on the alert and started the planes scouting."

Doris was perfectly serious. She had the same amazing earnestness about these felines as the King. I tried to laugh.

WE walked along the road toward the house, and I kept saying the name of Broko Blue over to myself. Broko Blue—a dangerous man. He feeds the cats.

A tall, thin lady was coming up the road from the opposite direction. She was carrying a suitcase and wearing a summer-resort costume—green shorts and a black and white striped blouse like a basketball referee. Looking at her face you'd swear she was about to hit the tape at the finish of a hundred-yard dash.

"Dost see yon human spider?" I said, catching Doris by the hand. We stopped and watched this long-legged apparition streak up to the door of the cabin. She wasn't so unpretty as to leave any doubt as to her species and gender. This buggish look came mainly from the stripes and the bright green. She'd done her hair up in a green scarf, and a hurried job it was, with the ends of the knotted scarf horned up in the air like two antennae.

"She's heard the news," said Doris.

"About the King absconding?"

"She believes it and she's scared to death. She thinks there's going to be a revolution."

"You're psychic, Doris. How can you tell?"

"It's always that way when a government gets too quiet and peaceful. Governments aren't meant to be that way. Whether it's Kadenza or Tasmania or United States or Timbuctoo, the people know. They can feel things like this instinctively. If months pass and they don't hear anything but good news out of the capital, they know it's time to get scared. Something's going to break. Well, here it is. This lady, vacationing in the forest, is just one of thousands. All over the kingdom they're on the jump this morning, running over to their neighbors, saying 'Have you heard? Lenzono the Jumpy has jumped off his throne'."

"Come on, Doris, let's go see whether

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you're psychic or not. Maybe this dame came to borrow some eggs for breakfast."

We went over and joined the party. I must say that all three of these folks were running a high temperature of agitation. Mr. and Mrs. Woodsman and this green-buggish spinster were covering the political ground like three news commentators turned loose on each other. We came in, and the three of them turned on us.

I'm always amazed at the gift of eloquence which Nature has bestowed upon the female of the species. Mrs. Woodsman and this spinster, who turned out to be a vacationer from England by the name of Maud Slade, had the situation pretty well in hand, but Doris added her note of sanity to the excitement, and among them they straightened out the story.

MR. WOODSMAN and I sat back and nodded as they went over the high points. We were all gathered on the side porch where the smell of charred bacon came through the open half of the kitchen kindow, and right out there on top of the woodpile, sweating like a beaver, was the absconded King doing his best to earn a breakfast.

Believe me, brother, that King was learning all the tricks of acting like a hungry tramp. When he'd take a deep breath for a swing of the ax and catch a noseful of bacon odor, his tongue would hang out so natural that no Hollywood director could have improved on it.

Of course, none of us paid the least attention to him. We were too busy speculating upon the fate of the King.

According to the radio reports, a rumor from an unrevealed source had reached the palace shortly after midnight that King Lenzono was known to be very desirous of walking out on his kingdom for some personal reason, said reason being unknown.

The report that he had gone was a rumor, nor more. For the King had just gone into a two-weeks' seclusion and had left orders that he was not to be disturbed.

Had they broken in to see whether he was there? No. To do so would have been to disobey his command, and the assistants at the palace hadn't dared put themselves in such a bad light with the public.

"Then we don't know but that he's still in there," I said.

"According to the radio," said Maud Slade, "the minister, Broko Blue, tried to communicate with the King."

"How do you know?"

"He spoke on the radio at one a. m., telling the people to be calm. As if we could be calm, when all signs point to a revolt!"

"Go on, Miss Slade," I said. But she couldn't. Her nerves were all unstrung. She'd been all alone in her vacation cottage when the news reached her, and she'd packed at once; and could she please stay here with these kind people until things were settled?

The woodsman's wife took the story on. "As I heard it, Broko Blue said that the door to the King's hiding place mustn't be opened unless there was sufficient evidence to prove he wasn't there. But Mr. Blue would try to give the people some assurance the rumor was false. He'd pass a note under the door for the King to sign."

This was too much for the actor-tramp working on the woodpile. He turned our way.

"Did he sign it?"

"You keep out of this," said the woodsman. "You're here to work, not to talk."

"But I'm a subject of the King, too," said the King, and I must say he was

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doing a marvelous job of acting now.

"Poor fellow," said the woodsman's wife. "He is a loyal citizen. Look, he wears orange socks."

Lenzono was quick to take advantage of her sympathy. "I'm hungry," he said weakly. "What about breakfast?"

"Let's see you ax your way through that timber first," said the woodsman. So Lenzono went on working and the rest of us went on discussing the fate of the King.

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Holly Seeks a Maiden

TO RESUME, the radio story of last night had finished with the startling, nations-rocking news that when Broko Blue drew the paper back from under the King's door it was still without a signature; therefore the palace doubted if the King was there. They were legally bound not to break in; but they felt a moral obligation to do something. So they notified the highway patrols to stop all traffic for questioning.

I turned to Doris. "There'd be the devil to pay if anyone tried to run through the blockade."

"There would be," said Doris.

We listened to the radio news and got the whole thing over again with one or two additions. The palace was in a wrangle as to the source of the rumor. Half the officials were convinced the King was in, half thought he'd walked out, and another thought he'd been kidnaped, to be held for ransom. But the search was going on, by highway and airway, and border nations were co-operating.

"Imagine a country like Anatogga co-operating," the woodsman grunted. "If the Anatoggans thought our King was gone, they'd march in and capture us."

Again the tramp on the woodpile paused and made himself over-conspicuous by scratching his ear with the edge of his ax.

"I have a hunch," said Doris, "that the country is in no danger."

"What do you know about it?" said Maud Slade, staring at Doris with her buggish green eyes.

"Nothing," said Doris. "Just a hunch."

"She's psychic. Her hunches are worth listening to."

"Tell us more," said Mrs. Woodsman. She was clutching a little orange-framed picture of His Majesty to her heart, and her devotion to it was overwhelming.

"I've a hunch that the King has taken a harmless vacation. I'll bet he's left everything in shipshape. And I'll bet that all this stir is the work of some malicious busybody who wants to make the King unpopular."

"Where would the King go?" Maud Slade asked skeptically. "What would he do?"

"I've a hunch," said Doris, "that he'd go somewhere where he wouldn't have to be a king, and he'd try some career he'd always wanted to try."

The buggish eyed spinster closed her eyes solemnly as if weighing this theory. She said, more to herself than to us, "I don't know the King. I've never seen him. But I'm a woman who reads and thinks. Even while in distant London I took him to my heart, so to speak. I think he must be a great man. If he leans to another career, I'm sure that he's making good this very minute."

The ax came down and a piece of timber leaped into the air.

"Look out!" the woodsman yelled.

We ducked. The chunk of wood sailed over the porch and crashed into the kitchen window.

For a minute the profanity turned

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the air blue. It was the woodsman's turn to be eloquent, and the rest of us held our breath and waited. He'd dressed down tramps before—there was no doubt about it—and he figured the time had come to chase this one down the road.

IT DIDN'T happen that way. Lenzono straightened to his full height of five feet, with the air of a giant and, yes, a king! His hand snapped down on the ax-handle near the blade, and he gestured like Joan of Arc riding to victory.

"Sir, I'm no ordinary tramp!"

"What kind are you, then?"

"A hungry one," said the King, with steely diction. "You bargained to feed me if I worked. Keep your bargain or I'll spread the alarm!"

"What alarm?"

"That you're harboring the missing King on your premises."

"Isn't he wonderful?" Doris whispered to me. Wonderful he was; I couldn't deny it. Here was a moment of hard-boiled, authoritative commandeering that was as kingly a rebuke as any Hollywood producer could have made it.

They took the King in and fed him a breakfast fit for a king. Mrs. Woodsman looked from him to the picture, and the more she looked the more frightened she became. She thought her husband might have earned himself an execution.

"We're all in this together," said Doris. "What about these faces? All trustworthy? Then we're going to share confidences. Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the honor to present Lenzono, King of Kadenza."

We bowed, and Maud Slade was so beside herself with delight that she knocked over a chair getting up.

"Speech! Speech!" I shouted.

The King took a deep, majestic breath and rose to the occasion.

"My worthy citizens of Kadenza, we are gathered here this morning to pass the bacon; therefore let us pass the bacon."

There was a fine lot of log-sawing done in and around the woodsman's cabin during the rest of that day, but not the sort that added to his supply of wood. The airplane had flown. No searching parties found their way into our lost corner of these five thousand green acres. The radio reports cooled down to a lot of routine questioning and frontier vigilance, with alibis of one sort and another that proved the action was definitely over for a few days. So it was a good day for sleep, and that's what we all did.

ANOTHER night of the same and another forenoon. Between times the King practiced his various routines in costume, and Doris and I gave him the benefit of our best Broadway recollections. The woodsman and his wife were delighted to have so much entertainment right in their front yard, and they were as pleased as Punch to be in on Lenzono's confidences.

As for my own business, I was getting exactly what I wanted. Here was a sublime example of the devotion of common people to their ruler; also of a ruler's gift of being attractive to them at close range. With all his jumpy ways and funny boners at learning to act, he was a genuinely lovable fellow, and it was all Mrs. Woodsman could do to keep from mothering him like a favorite grandchild.

"I'm going to write you up, Your Majesty, so that all America will know you're a regular guy."

"I don't want to be a regular guy," said the King. "I want to be an actor."

"Aren't you afraid of taking it too

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seriously?" I suggested. "That love scene you were playing with Doris—er—I'd rather see the lighter touch. A bit more burlesque. You know, just not too damned serious."

"I am an actor," said the King. "I like to lose myself completely in my roles."

"Well, you play that love stuff with Maud Slade for a change," I said. "Doris and I are going to drive around these lonesome roads a little while this afternoon and see if we can't locate a more suitable place for your rehearsals. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said the King. "But no love scenes this afternoon—"

"You mean us?"

"I mean me. I'm doing Prospero from The Tempest. Miss Slade will be my daughter, albeit she has ten years the advantage of me. Oh, Eddie—"

"Huh?"

"If you go deeper into the forest be sure you have your skull with you."

"I'm never without it," I cracked.

It would have been a beautiful day to get married, but you know how poorly these forests are equipped with the necessities of civilization. This might be a preacher's house, but it turns out to be a three-acre farm; that house looks hopeful, but when you get up closer you can see it's vacant except for a few stray cats climbing through the broken windows; and all the time here's the gorgeous girl beside you, asking where you think you're going. And when you finally tell her, she laughs at you and says it takes two to make a match and she'd never marry a man till she really knew him.

"This is the third day," I said. "By now you can read me like a book."

"How do I know you'd be brave and true in a crisis?"

"I hit true with those hamburgers, didn't I? How much of a crisis does it take? I was brave enough to steal our breakfast from some fussy old hen—no insult to the woodsman's wife intended—"

"I came here for a story, the same as you did," said Doris. "You're getting yours from the King. I'm still on the trail of mine, and I'm not sure where to look; but I think we're getting warmer."

"I think you're right. Ten to one this fellow we're overtaking is a preacher. Look how dreamily he sways on that bicycle. And he's singing." I slowed down beside him. Doris began threatening me. But I was already shooting my question. "Friend, I've just laid a bet that you've staged many a wedding in your day. Do I win or lose?"

"You win," said the bicyclist. "You folks from America too? I thought so."

He hooked one hand over the window and coasted along beside us. He was plumpish, not quite middle-aged, shrewd looking, and keen as a fox. His eyes were expressive of depth, and I decided that if he was a preacher, his church was some mystic cult. I gave him our names. "And you are Reverend—"

He shook his head. "The weddings I've staged were stage weddings, Mr. Trent. I'm a writer of plays and, in a limited way, a producer. My name is James Holly. Address, Hollywood."

IN THE next two miles we got acquainted with Mr. Holly at the speed of ten miles an hour. Holly and I talked, and Doris and I nudged (she was ribbing me because this fellow hadn't turned out to be a preacher), and she and Holly smiled in a way that burned me up.

Holly wanted us, he said, and we had come along at an opportune moment for him, for he wanted to make up a dummy cast for his new play and go

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through a few stage directions to get the script lined out. Would we accommodate him and come, with all our friends, to the old pavilion on the other side of yon blue hill tomorrow at ten—free coffee and doughnuts and a good time would be had by all.

"We'll be there with friends," said Doris, quick to clinch a bet for our pal the King.

"Thank you, that's all," said Mr. Holly. "Now you may turn back. Good day." He cycled on ahead.

I touched the accelerator and we eased up even with him. I said, "Hang on—I'll take you where you want to go."

"I'm cycling on purpose. I parked my Rolls and borrowed this bicycle for a reason," he said, lifting an eyebrow mysteriously. "I'm scouting for talent, and the sound of a car scares some of these forest folks back into their lairs."

"If you're looking for a leading lady," said Doris, "er—ahem!"

"You're very lovely, Miss Jastrow. But the part calls for a clinging vine, a maiden in distress, one who has suffered much."

"He thinks I haven't suffered," Doris said to me. "Tell him how you propose."

"I appreciate your helpfulness," he went on, "and I'm delighted to hear of this versatile young actor who is with you. If he can play a villain as well as a trap, he'll be exceedingly valuable to me in this emergency. Now, friends, I'll ask you to turn back. The heroine I'm looking for is very shy—oh, oh! There she is."

CHAPTER VIII

Danger—Cats Ahead!

WHAT I first saw was a highly colored strip of patchwork quilt that caught a streak of sunlight at the side of a tree. Then a head peeked around the tree-trunk, and sure enough, it was a beautiful, scared-looking girl with long, dark eyelashes and hair like a waterfall of platinum, dressed in an attractively ragged sarong-like costume that must have been cut down from a colorful peasant dress. Pardon me while I catch my breath. In brief, she was beautiful and velvety, and I jammed on the brakes.

Mr. Holly leaned his bicycle against the car and hung his elbow over the window as if he owned it. He smiled at this apparition of rustic beauty and said, "Ride?"

The girl shook her head.

"Ride?" I said. She looked at me and didn't shake her head.

Then Doris said very sweetly, "Can't we give you a lift? Open the door for her, Eddie."

I opened the door. She ran the other way like a deer. Mr. Holly jumped on his bicycle and lit out right through the stumps and underbrush after her. Then Doris caught me by the sleeve.

"Wait a minute, pal, you're not going anywhere."

"Pardon me," I said, as dazed as if I'd smacked into a falling star. "Pardon me."

"I never fall in love with a man till I know how he behaves in a crisis," said Doris.

Her words had a faintly familiar ring, but all I could say at the moment was, "Crisis—you said it." Simultaneously I reached for my address book, which just goes to show how your habits will follow you all the way into the forest.

"Do you see what I see?" asked Doris, and now she was gasping.

"I see Mr. Holly on a commando chase through the thicket. His next picture'll be Babes in the Woods—"

"Step on it, Eddie!"

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I was still gazing.

"Step on it, Eddie."

"The starter's dead," I said. "Besides, we're out of gas, and the steering-gear's locked—"

"And you've forgotten how to drive. O.K., I'll walk."

SHE got out and slammed the door, and struck out in a strange direction—not up the road or down it or toward the bicycle chase, but off southwest into the shadows of that big rocky hill a quarter of a mile across. Just unbroken wilderness, I thought.

Then I saw. There was a broken-down, vine-covered, ivory-walled building—the hidden temple—right in front of our eyes.

"Wait, Doris, I'll come with you."

"Don't bother," she said. She was passing under a branch, and the bark must have scraped the crest of her hair, for she looked back at the leaves with a puzzled expression. "Eddie, is that chauffeur's cap in the car? Toss it to me, will you?"

She caught the cap, slapped it on her head, and off she went. I went after her. I didn't break my neck to overtake her because I knew she was provoked. Just to show my independence I'd string along twenty yards behind her—

She screamed. Her arms flew up to her ears, and she screamed as if she'd been shot—no, as if she was about to be. Those three cats must have leaped for her at the same instant. They must have come down from a tree like lightning. First they weren't there and then they were. And every blooming one of them clung to the chauffeur's cap.

"Eddie! Eddie!"

"Coming! Coming! Knock your cap off!"

The cats did that for her. They went down with it. Then up they bounded, a bit less ferocious than mountain wildcats pouncing on a helpless bird—and could those felines jump! They went for her head.

I made the twenty yards in approximately no seconds flat, and somewhere on the way a stick jumped into my hand. I came at them clubbing like a strike-breaker.

"Run, girl, run!" My yell sounded like something out of the first reader. In the blind fury of beating off those crazy felines, I remember wondering if the man who wrote "Run, girl, run" had been inspired by anything as exciting as this.

I held the cats at bay for a few minutes and they saw they were wasting their jumps. So they changed their tunes and began to purr very softly.

"It's all right, Doris, I've got them tamed." Even as I turned to call to her, the three cats jumped for my head, caught on and dug their claws in.

I had visions of a shower of hair like a barbershop in a blizzard. It wasn't quite that bad. I'll say this for the cats, they knew what they wanted. They didn't want to kick or scrape or explore the region below the surface of my skull; all they wanted was to hang on, which they did.

If I shook my head they dug in deeper; if I held still they relaxed. If you want a recipe for a quick headache, take my word for it, there's nothing surer or swifter than three Kadenza cats. But I wouldn't advise four.

I was in the act of tugging at the napes of the feline necks when Doris came running back from the car with my haversack. I was debating whether it would be less painful to pull the beasts off by main strength or to simply remove my scalp. Then here was Doris taking the skull out of my haversack.

The cats took an interested look at it.

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Doris tossed it to the ground.

They bounded down after it, and since it offered no resistance, they nestled down to it.

CHAPTER IX

Solo Flight, Bareback

IF THESE cats were trying to get something to hatch out of that skull, they lacked the patience of a mother hen. We stood by for a few minutes, because of the curiosity of the phenomenon, and presently the cats scampered away.

"Now what do you make of that?" asked Doris.

"Only one thing: they were just as happy over this old empty skull as they were over my head."

"Or mine," said Doris. "Not very flattering." We picked up the skull and went back to the car.

I maintain it wasn't this cat scare that turned us away from the temple. That chalky old structure was so fascinating from a safe distance that we could imagine all sorts of things about its glorious past. But we were sort of sidetracked by our own glorious present, getting acquainted, as it were; and pretty soon we saw that it was time we were getting back to headquarters.

I couldn't see anything of Mr. Holly, but I supposed he'd been left in the shade long before this. He'd never get that shy little forest girl to act in his play, I'd bet.

We made it in time for supper with the King and Maud Slade and Mr. and Mrs. Woodsman. It was a crowded household, but our rustic hosts were in the heights of glory to be entertaining the King and his friends. Maud Slade might have gone back to her own cottage, but every radio newscast stirred her with political fright. She not only felt safer here, but she was having too good a time to leave. She'd read plays with the King all afternoon.

Our news about Mr. Holly was the thrill of the day for Lenzono the Jumpy, and he carried on like a Mexican jumping-bean, self-contained but highly expressive.

Of course, we hadn't given it away that he was the King; all of us vowed again to keep his secret. Consequently, he was sure Mr. Holly's play would be the test of a lifetime—not a matter of riding through on the luck of noble birth, but a proof or disproof of talents he'd developed on his own.

ALL in all, it was a very happy household that evening, and no one thought of complaining of the accommodations. The King and I had a window apiece in our barn loft, and what we lacked in radio music was made up in the gentle mooing of cows and the croaking of frogs.

As His Majesty was just about to dream away for the night I mentioned the skull.

"Why'd you have to bring that thing along?"

"For protection," said the King. "If you're not familiar with the ways of Kadenza cats—and most people aren't—it's best to have a skull with you. It might save you a headache."

"That was proved to me very forcibly this afternoon," I said. And when I related my story I added, "The thing that got me was that the cats didn't seem to prefer my skull to the emptier one."

"They'll usually show a preference for the more obviously empty ones."

"What's the idea? Who ever heard of cats with a mania for sitting on skulls?"

"It's a long story," said the King sleepily. "It's a story that helps explain why I want to be an actor. There's more power in Kadenza cats than any-

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one knows—I mean anyone but a few of us who've discovered—but it's a long story, Eddie. I'll tell you all about it sometime maybe. . . . Goodnight."

As luck would have it, I was destined to learn a great deal about the power of cats before that night was over.

Night was never the time to sleep, in my chosen tupsy-turvy. Night was always my time to lie awake and ponder any disturbing little thing in the universe, such as stars running behind schedule or street-cars jumping out at fast motor cars and causing a long screech, sometimes ending with a bang and sometimes without, or whether the banjo player on my neighbor's 2:00 a.m. radio show would ever discover he habitually missed his sharps.

Tonight I pondered how long that work-horse in stall three would have to chew hay before he'd feel like taking me for a ride. And so, before the King had gotten into his lower snore register, I was loping away bareback, whispering into the ear of this old nag, "Quiet, Bill, quiet. On your tiptoes, if any. We can't afford to wake up the natives."

CHAPTER X

Voices Out of the Dark

THE temple wasn't quite where I'd left it, or else my calculations slipped somewhere. By my logarithms and compass points, any location on the other side of the hill to your north can be approached from the west as well as the east if your horse can swim. Doris and I had come the long way around. My steed and I invented short-cuts.

In due course of time we nosed up against a grilled iron fence where the cats were holding a midnight singing school, and I knew I was all right.

"Stay tied to this tree, Bill," whispered I in the nag's ear. "If I'm not back in time for your morning oats, you're welcome to jerk loose and gallop home alone."

The old temple might have been a gay place in its day. From what I've read of this little known realm, the English planted their language here several centuries ago and, in general, their religion. But there remained a few reminders, such as this ancient pagan temple, of the dark and mysterious past. A temple like this was a storehouse of ancient mysteries. Whether this place had gathered unto itself the cultural descendants of the ancient cult, or whether it may have served as a breeding-place for new adherents to its mysteries was something to wonder about. My own theory, to be born out of this weird night, was that the master of mysteries, Von Darsk, had twisted all past traditions into more spirals than you can count on a revolving barber pole.

I crawled over the fence. My skull hung to my back, supported by a cord over my shoulder. I think a dozen or more cats jumped for it as I passed along this section of catland. They jumped on and off by turns. The fact that none of them stayed on for any length of time meant, as I later learned, that none had headaches.

There's one for your book of oddities. Kadenza cats get rid of headaches in the same way some people get rid of worries or the blues—by passing them on to someone else. The sort of headache a Kadenza cat gathers up (through his eyes and ears) can be passed on to a skull. And that isn't the last of it—but wait, you'll see in a moment.

PASSING along the paths through the garden by starlight, you'd have thought this temple was a forester's cottage away off the road, protected

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against intruders by an iron fence. But if you tiptoed up the chalky old stairs and looked in at the one visible light, you'd get an amazing glimpse through a narrow corridor of an elegant room away back inside. Wouldn't I have been a fool to walk right in?

For that matter, it was quite conceivable that I was a fool to come. One of my many consciences kept arguing in that direction, "What do you think you're up to?"

Me: "Just came over to get acquainted."

Conscience: "Then why don't you stand there by the door, ring the bell, or knock, or call, and ask if this is where that beautiful girl lives? Why do you keep slipping back into the shadows?"

Me: "This is a scary place. I've a hunch it's dangerous around here."

Conscience: "Keep out of mischief and you'll keep out of danger."

Me: "I've got another hunch there's something important happening inside these walls. Mr. Holly is right—that girl did look frightened enough to be a maiden in distress."

Another conscience: "Now you're talking, Trent. Man to the rescue."

Another conscience: "What will Doris say?"

Another conscience: "What would your research foundation think? You're being paid to get a line on the King."

Another conscience: "Don't stick your nose in other people's business, Mr. Trent."

Sixteen consciences went after me, more or less, and I kept right on walking through the shadows, looking for doorways that weren't there, and dodging back for fear they were, climbing up and down the various tiers of cat walks—and I use the term advisedly, for this old temple must have been the national convention headquarters for all ferocious felines.

It was so dark you couldn't tell when you were going to stumble over one of the invisible fur balls, but I'm glad to say they were all in a most peaceable mood. Strange, considering the way they went after Doris and me a few hours earier.

It was so quiet that my sleeve brushing along the rocky walls sounded like radio static on a stormy night. Whenever I turned suddenly I was in danger of popping my skull—the one that hung on my back—against the chalky facade, causing a noise like close thunder.

Now I was descending, and the way was growing blacker. This temple front was something like a face of a very steep pyramid, and in my groping along by the light of the stars I'd gathered too much elevation for any use. But on the down grade I came within hearing of some voices down in the blackness of what I judged to be a descent into a basement.

I listened. No lights. No shadows. Only total blackness and these low voices.

"Any more cats due from the palace tonight?"

"No. Didn't Von Darsk tell you? Tonight is the night."

"*The* night?" said the first voice. "You mean Broko Blue is coming out to make his proposal? The date's been changed, then? I'm just back from my vacation."

"The date's been set forward," said the second voice, "as a matter of convenience."

I WAITED, hoping that first voice would ask some more questions. I couldn't see either of the men, but when they resumed talking I gathered that they were two of the guards at this place.

The night, I learned, had something

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to do with Broko Blue, the King's minister, and an event that had been awaited for several years, something kept secret from the King and the country.

"Yes, he'll come out sometime tonight," said the second voice. "Von Darsk said we'd know him by the silver sea-horse cane he always carries. Everything is arranged. When he arrives, he'll be conducted straight to the garden to meet *her*. Von Darsk is not to be disturbed."

"Does she know?"

"Yes, and the two old women say she's in a fury."

"How do they know? She outsmarts them all the time."

"Anyway, she'll meet him tonight and learn all about her fate. They're not waiting until her eighteenth birthday, because the King's disappearance made it so convenient for Blue to come now."

"Wonder what explanations he'll offer. Imagine trying to make up to a princess that you've kidnapped and held prisoner. Especially a proud Anatoggan like Muriel."

"Broko Blue won't waste any sympathy. He will sell Kadenza out, one way or another. If he can't make friends with Muriel, he'll have her killed—*too*."

"Too? Who else? The King?"

"Naturally. The trap is about to spring at last."

There was a long, tense silence.

My lungs took a vacation from breathing and my heart went on a strike. Then—

"Well, you know what it means to us when Kadenza gets taken over by Anatogga. We'll be generals."

"And you know what it means to our master, Von Darsk. He'll climb to the top in no time."

"With the aid of the cats."

"Of course. That's Von Darsk's secret. With the cats to serve him, his power spreads like a forest fire. He's already gathering impressions from across the sea."

"Indeed? How did his cats go so far?"

"Some Americans have come over here, unless these cats and skulls have given us a twisted story. There are three of them, all trying in one way or another to penetrate the secrets of our realm."

"If they come this way, Von Darsk will take care of them." The speaker gave a sinister chuckle. "With steel teeth. That's his latest."

"These Americans were seen somewhere on these forest roads a few hours ago. Muriel herself saw them, and came running home in great excitement. She had the mistaken notion that one of them was Broko Blue coming for his long dreaded visit. The two old women told Von Darsk all about it."

"Did those American strangers try to come in?"

"Some cats with headaches drove all three of them off. But we'd better keep a sharp lookout tonight. If the electrician doesn't get the searchlights fixed up, we'll have to patrol the grounds."

Another voice was added to these, and there was quite a little grumbling about the lazy electrician. Finally the guards agreed to divide the grounds and go to work, and one of them said he would climb the terrace wall just to be sure everything was clear overhead.

Terrace wall? That's where I was. At this moment all sixteen of my consciences advised me that it was high time to move.

CHAPTER XI

I Turn Broko Blue

"WHO'S there?"

That couldn't have been meant for me because I wasn't there any more.

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I was definitely enroute, and the gravel and dust were jumping to make way for my feet.

"Who's there?"

Just two ordinary words thrown together in the form of a question, but the second time they sounded like a command, and the third time they resembled profanity.

"Watch the west fence, Hobart, we've got a customer."

All pitch dark, you understand. I couldn't even see myself, but I believe I was heading in the right direction, toward my horse. Or should I bother with that old plug when so much depended on speed?

The shouts were closing in on me from three directions, so I took advantage of the darkness and fell headlong into a bush. It was comfortable here, and I rolled over and studied the stars.

Foul mutterings came and went along the paths, mostly readings of the electrician's pedigree for failing to repair the searchlights. How were guards expected to watch the whole countryside without lights?

An airplane circled over and the guards forgot about me. A flare was dropping down out of the sky. Someone on the temple steps waved a torch. Then the plane circled again and dropped another flare that must have been aimed to land on the temple steps. In the light of it I could see something else falling, supported by a small parachute.

My first thought was, here comes Broko Blue. He's starting off his evening with a cheap stunt so he can warm up to Muriel with lovesongs and gags, such as, "Broko Blue came out of the blue to you."

Wrong again. It wasn't Broko. It wasn't anyone. It was a thing—a bright, silvery something like a fairy wand, and there in the flare stood a half dozen roughly dressed guards waiting to catch it.

That gave me my chance to rise to my feet, dust off my dignity and go calmly and so silently on my way. But in the coal-blackness of a forest one may overlook cats, mice or men. This time I came face to face with one of the latter. He halted me and struck a match.

"Aren't you on the wrong path?" he said.

I held my tongue. He was as brutal as the other guards I'd glimpsed; but there was an uncertainty in his voice that reminded me there was just one of him and one of me. His pals had gone to the flare, and if I could throw a quick punch I'd bypass him.

"This path don't lead to the temple," he growled. "It goes out to the fence. Where d'yuh think you're goin'?"

"After my horse, see?" I said. The match was flickering out. I doubled my fists.

"Oh, your horse; sea?" There was a cheerful surprise in his voice just when I'd meant to swing. "You mean your sea-horse?"

"Sea-horse? Have it your own way.

"Your sea-horse cane, Mr. Blue. It just now came by plane. Didn't you see?"

"See?"

"See the sea-horse? Your cane—it came by plane—just now. Now do you see?"

"It's getting plainer," I admitted, but dizzily.

"A cat brought your message a few minutes ago—said you were on your way but you'd forgot your sea-horse cane, and of course you never go anywhere without your cane. One of your superstitions, I believe."

"Yes," I said, and now I was wish-

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ing with all my heart for the King's ability to act. Wouldn't I give these boys a performance if they'd take me for Broko Blue and let me fix things?

THIS fellow, Von Darsk's lieutenant and captain of the guards, ushered me toward the temple. "Right this way, Mr. Blue. As I was saying, your message said that you'd phoned back to the palace so a plane would deliver your cane—"

"The sea-horse; I see. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"We guards understand everything, Mr. Blue. You're to have an hour's visit with Muriel—"

"Only an hour?"

"That was your agreement with Von Darsk, wasn't it? After all, the hour is late, and you know Muriel has been disciplined to the strictest routine ever since you—er—"

"Since I kidnapped her from the Anatoggans," I said. My bluntness took his breath, so I followed through. "By the way, what did you think of that stroke of daring?"

"I quite agree with Von Darsk," said the lieutenant, "that your bravery will eventually make you the King of the combined countries. Right up these steps, Mr. Blue. These guards caught your cane before it struck. I hope you find it in perfect condition. Now you follow me through this passage to the garden."

"Is it safe?"

"You like to jest, I see. Where in all the world is your life valued more than here in the temple of Von Darsk?"

"You've got something there, buddy," I said. My phrasing was a bit on the rough side, and I sensed that this cocky lieutenant was angling for my best palace manners and rhetoric. But I was putting the gauge on him, all right, and already I saw that Broko Blue was not going to be the final winner in the throat-slitting game.

According to the weights and measures of the guard's conversation, I could see that Broko Blue would stay in the saddle just long enough to ride both horses into one political stable; and as soon as the King was out of the way and Kadenza and Anatogga were joined in political wedlock, Broko Blue would be in line for assassination and this fellow Von Darsk, whom I'd never seen but was beginning to know by reputation, would take the reins.

There were a lot of questions burning the insides out of me, and among them —what did they mean when they talked of Von Darsk's power coming from his cats? I had the ominous presentiment that the whole caboodle of cat talk was gathering up for some mysterious catastrophe.

Then I was face to face with the princess Muriel, and something told me my eyes were about to be opened.

CHAPTER XII

Skulls Know the Answers

PICTURE me walking into a garden by the light of three or four Chinese lanterns. Picture an ornamental iron gate swinging open for me while my guide introduces me as Mr. Broko Blue. Fill in the background of your mental picture with ornamental shrubbery of millions of intricate little leaves like a shower of green and blue confetti all around you, shading off into the night's blackness. Do you get a weird feeling something like a dream of oriental romance?

All right, now what do you see within this exotic setting? A few cats with shiny yellow eyes. A few skulls oozing thin streams of reddish translucent smoke. A girl—

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But I won't ask you to picture her. You couldn't possibly—

Here, try holding your breath and turning off your heart for ten seconds. You're seeing her. Now let your heart beat triple time for thirty seconds. She's seeing you.

She's observing that you carry the sea-horse cane; she notes you're oblivious to the cat that has just jumped on your shoulder; she sees that you've brought a skull, hung against your back, for protection.

Now that you have a vague conception of my sensations, I'll go on with my story.

"So you are Muriel," I said. "For a princess you choose strange company."

"So you are Broko Blue," she mocked politely, "who has thrust strange company upon me."

I gave her an innocent look without half trying, but probably I made no impression. She had been in a fury, according to the guard. I wondered. A woman's fury at best is a pale thing compared to a woman's beauty, in my opinion.

"You may sit down," she said in a gracious manner. "I know why you've come and what you're going to say, so it shouldn't take us long to reach an understanding."

"Well, you're 'way ahead of me," I said.

"I've rechecked your sentiments and emotions to make sure. Consequently, you'd just as well know that I'm prepared to reject your proposal."

"M-m-m. That's the quickest I've ever been turned down," I mumbled, very much puzzled over her directness. "Would it make any difference if I'd dream up some diamonds and furs along with the orange blossoms?"

Muriel frowned as if to keep from smiling. "You're not a bit like I remembered you."

"When was the last time you saw me?"

"About ten years ago, not counting this afternoon," she said. "I wasn't even sure it was you this afternoon, Mr. Blue. You looked a wee bit friendly."

"How do I look now?"

"Still friendly. Your treachery must be a fine art. From your looks one would never know you're plotting to kill me."

"One would never know," I countered, "that you were expecting to be killed. Are you sure that's what I'm planning?"

"Quite positive."

"It's a proposition that I don't relish," I said. "How'd you get onto this notion?"

"Through the cats and the skulls and this."

SHE gestured with the jeweled hand mirror, and I stared at it. It was a glittering thing, as thin as a knife blade. Now that she called my attention to it, I was aware that she was waving it around, catching the streams of thin red smoke that flowed out of the skulls.

"It's not an extra fine mirror," she said, "but it brings in a few hazy images. The two old ladies taking care of me have been considerate enough to give me some education. And I've learned what I could from the forest. But most of my knowledge of the outside world has come through this mirror."

I didn't see how. I was about to ask, but she wasn't through pulverizing me with her calm, quiet, icy words.

"So you see I've learned enough to hate you just as my mother hated you. I'm glad she didn't live to know your plan against us would succeed."

"You know a good deal for a seven-

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teen-year-old girl," I said.

"I'm almost eighteen."

"If you know so much, just what is my plan from start to finish?" I moved closer, extending my arm along the back of the bench, and my hand rested on her shoulder. She gave no sign of noticing, though I knew by now that she must despise and fear me.

Only not really me—Broko Blue!

And what, by the way, had happened to that chappie? Tire trouble or guard trouble? There was going to be the devil to pay sooner or later. But as long as this lasted I was certainly getting the low-down on King Lenzono's minister.

"Your whole plan?"

"Don't ever stop. Go right on talking."

"The mirror started to hum," said Muriel. "That skull on the fence is about to give off its headache. No, not yet. The red rays weren't quite thick enough."

"You're such a sweet girl I wish I knew what you're talking about. See here, Muriel, if you were meeting me for the first time and there wasn't any such thing as hatred or treachery between us, how would you feel about me?"

"I'd be sorry for you," she said, as quick as a wink, "because you'd be dead. You couldn't live without treachery."

"How can you say things like that and smile?"

"These skulls have taught me," she said. "I've learned to keep my sentiments and emotions to myself so that no cats will carry my secrets away in a headache."

I looked at her and marveled. What she had said was no more unusual to her than if she had passed a remark on the weather. I saw now what the King meant when he said Broko Blue was the dangerous man at the palace because he fed the cats.

You could just barely hear echoes of angry voices from somewhere around the other end of the temple. Some one was in a bad mood. My time was short.

I took a long shot in the dark.

"So you know all the answers, my beautiful. Well, we'll see whether you do or not. Let's have 'em right down the line—A, B, C, D. Where did this all begin?"

"It began when you wanted to marry my mother, hoping to draw Anatogga's royalty into a war, against Kadenza."

"My stars, Beautiful, do I look old enough to make love to your mother?"

She gave me a strange look, and she seemed to be waiting for some response from the mirror, which she continued to wave in the air slowly as if to catch the wisps of red smoke.

But now that she was started, she did come through with all the answers—her mother's love affair that cut me out, her mother's illness and death, her own kidnapping, and so on, right down to the present.

It gave a very guilty feeling as we went down the list. Not one of my sixteen consciences was up to this ordeal. What a man of stone Broko Blue must have been!

For safekeeping I tabulated the facts carefully mentally, and for once I very nearly ran out of alphabet.

CHAPTER XIII

Murder in the Alphabet Soup

"WE'LL start with A. Oh, yes, Beautiful, I gambled for your mother and lost. Rather a blow to my ego, don't you imagine? Next, *B?*"

"You became insane with jealousy when my mother married. Two years

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later I was born, and I've no doubt you began plotting at once to kidnap me."

Thick and fast it came as I called off the letters. This diabolical Blue, I was convinced, had contrived to make Muriel his pawn. He'd kept up appearances at the palace, kidded the King into thinking he was indispensable as a minister, and played his treacheries on the side. The cats had been the connecting link between him and this temple, where the mystical Von Darsk played with a strange brand of magic inherited from centuries ago.

With Von Darsk's help, Broko Blue had kidnapped Muriel when she was ten, had placed her here for safekeeping in the care of Von Darsk's two faithful old ladies and the guards. Here she had been intimidated into subjection, not daring to run away; and so she had grown up, a beautiful child of the forest.

Broko Blue had bided his time until now. But at last, according to her information received through the cats, he meant to carry out his villainous and bloody scheme.

"*N, O, P* and *Q*," Muriel went on, "you know that if you simply assassinated the King and tried to take over the government, you'd lose. King Lenzono's reign is popular. But Anatogga would invade at once if he lost the reins. So, in order to work your plan you must make yourself a hero to both countries in a single stroke."

"That's a big order," I said. "How do I intend to do it?"

"By revealing that I was kidnapped soon after my mother's death. By breaking the news that I'm still alive, a prisoner in the forest of Kadenza. By adding the gross lie that it was the King who perpetrated these crimes. By killing King Lenzono in a trumped-up fight to clinch this lie, and then pretending you're a champion who has won over his evils."

"But that won't work," I said, "because these guards of Von Darsk know too much, and so do you."

"Von Darsk and his men are all in it. Moreover, they have other reasons for telling nothing. But you do have to deal with me, that is true, and that is why you've come here tonight. That's why you plan to come again tomorrow night, and the next, and the next—"

"Are you sure?" It sounded delightful, and I wanted to say, "O.K., from now on we're keeping company, Beautiful." But a couple of uneasy feelings held me back: I was getting a thorough chill from the increasing iciness of her tone, and I was disturbed by a lingering curiosity about what Doris Jastrow would think of all this.

"You've plotted everything right down to the moment of my decision," Muriel went on. "You'll go on being pleasant and innocent this way until you think you have won my confidence—"

"And then—"

"You'll give me the choice of marrying you, promising to share your falsehoods—in which case you think Anatogga would simply claim Kadenza through our marriage and put us on the throne."

"Very neat," I admitted, "but King Lenzono wouldn't like it."

"He'll be dead. You'll see to that before the end of this week. Three different cats have straggled home with headaches over your murderous moods."

"More headaches. I'm getting another."

"I know it," she said, much to my surprise, "and I'm about to get the benefit of it. You see, there's a cat behind you transferring your emotional state directly into the skull on the fence, and the red smoke is com-

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ing strong against my glass now. I can almost hear the talk of your inner thoughts."

THE amazing workings of this telegraphic chain were crystal clear to me at last. Every subsequent impression I picked up fitted into this theory: that these Kadenza cats gathered through their sensitive ears and eyes and fur all the manifestations of a person's emotional state, whenever such manifestations reached a certain degree of strength. True, the cat had no particular understanding of these impressions, but once loaded with them it would retain them. A cat would carry the headache, as these temple folk described it, until it could unload its burden upon a human skull.

The impact of this discovery left me gasping for breath—and a drink . . . even several drinks.

It was evident from my past encounter with these felines that said cat, loaded with said headache, would leap for any sort of skull, living or dead. A contact seemed to be required for them to relieve themselves of their electrical charge.

Finally, the last step in the chain, as I was now observing, was the catch the resulting emanations from the loaded skull—emanations which took on the appearance of luminous red smoke. At this moment Muriel was catching these transformed emotions and sentiments and highly charged thoughts on the hand-mirror.

The mirror was humming audibly. It was, as I had noted, a very thin diaphragm—and I could distinguish the faint sounds of talking.

Moreover, light waves were being stimulated by the red smoke. Muriel was watching a moving image, a miniature movie, on the face of the mirror! No wonder she knew all of Broko Blue's plans. And no wonder that there had been such close communication between Broko Blue and Von Darsk.

Now, too, I understood how Muriel had managed to keep her own knowledge a secret. As long as one did not let his emotions burn too brightly, and kept his temperature down, so to speak, the cats wouldn't be able to get a load of him.

And so, during this strange conversation among the skulls and cats and red smoke of this garden, Muriel had spoken her hatreds *quietly*. Her terrors of Broko Blue had been kept under control. She had been suppressing her inner feelings, thereby hiding them from these sensitive felines.

And now, through the flow of smoky red emanations from the eyes of that skull on the fence, she was about to salvage my unspoken words. "Could I be wrong about you?" She looked up at me with a most puzzled expression. Her lips moved without speaking, then, and I knew the impressions were coming too fast for her to catch her balance. She was blushing.

I walked around in circles. I leaned against a fence, hardly daring to look back at her. My deception wasn't clear to her yet. In another moment it would be.

"You tell me I'm going to kill the King and fasten my lies upon him," I said, "and I'm about to offer you the choice of marrying me, to keep all my guilty secrets. But suppose you refuse to do this? Won't my plan fall through?"

"No, because you'll kill me, too," said Muriel. "You'll kill me a few minutes before you kill the King, and you'll proclaim him the murderer—but wait! Am I mistaken? What is this coming to me?"

"What is it?"

"You've changed. You're not you.

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You're—you're someone else."

SHE bounded to my side, thrust the mirror in front of my face, trying to bring me the faint hum of sound and the fading image. But in doing so she lost contact with the trail of luminous smoke. She whirled back toward the skull. I knew she was angry; she couldn't help it. It was amazing that she could be so nice about it.

"You'd better go. You're one of the Americans. Why have you come? Why have you decived me so?"

"I'm Eddie Trent, a friend of the King. I want to be your friend, too. I want to be more than a friend, if you can forgive me for this—"

"Please go. You're in danger, now that you know—"

"Now that I know, I'm going to help you," I said. "You're the one who's in danger. I'm crazy about you, honest —"

"Please. You fall in love too easily. You don't mean it—"

"But I do—"

She looked at me intently as if she wanted to believe me. "No, Mr. Trent, I think you're mistaken."

"I'm taking you away from here at once."

"If you only could—but I mustn't even hope. Already my heart is pounding. I must be calm, or they'll learn at once what I've betrayed—but there is one thing—

"Yes?"

"They say the King has disappeared. No one know whether he is in his palace or not. If you could only find him to convey my warning—"

Muriel was clutching my hands, and I must admit that I felt like a charge of dynamite to know that she was looking on me as a hero. Not yet a hero, but a potential one. If I could act fast and not get my signals crossed, here was opportunity at my door.

For, as luck would have it, I was one of the few persons in the world who knew where the King was. And at last I saw clearly the murderous plot. Lenzono the Jumpy was nearing his last jump, his kingdom was about to be sold out, and this beautiful young princess was facing death or worse.

A sad story it would be if I should return to America only to report that I had let an assassination plot play through my hands.

"It was your sea-horse cane," Muriel was saying, "that confused me. They say Broko Blue carries one for luck."

"This is his," I said. "It fell in the front yard, and the guards forced it on me."

"Then keep it," Muriel whispered. "Maybe it will change Broko Blue's luck . . . Listen! They're coming. I'll tell them you've gone. Hurry! . . . Through that gate. There's a footpath around the hill. Farewell."

"Farewell, princess."

For some strange reason I pressed my lips to the back of her hand, then whirled and made a dash for the gate, feeling like a knight who has just stormed a castle.

I hadn't rescued the maiden in distress by a long shot, but I hadn't exactly come away empty-handed. I had one good stout silver cane—

But a sudden blaze of searchlights from the top of the temple can play havoc with the surest of escapes. The lights flashed on, and I fell like a ton of earth into the tall grass within two yards of Bill, the sleepy old horse.

CHAPTER XIV

Von Darsk and Company

ANY four-footed beast with an ounce of spirit would have jumped and

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given me away. Bill's virtue was his habit of relaxing into a state of hypnosis. He'd slipped out of his tie-rope, had gazed off, and fallen asleep. What a dreadful thing to be such a dumb beast not to know or care that a man has fallen kerplunk alongside, much less to realize that said man carries the destiny of a nation on his back, along with a broken skull.

If Bill were only a yard closer, so I could rise in his shadow—

I tried to hook his mane with my cane.

My cane! My good luck!

The very thought was fatal. At first touch I overplayed my luck and it vanished.

In other words, Bill suddenly came to life with a jump. Then he and I were both gone, but in opposite directions—Bill to the deep forest, me into the hands of a trio of guards. What happened to the cane I didn't know, and I didn't ask to go back and look, for these birds were in no mood to do favors.

"Where'd you come from?" one of the guards asked.

The lieutenant came bounding up before I had time to reply, and he knew all the answers too well.

"This is the imposter that called himself Broko Blue."

"I didn't call myself anyone," I said, and those five little words earned me a slap across my bridgework. You see, the lieutenant knew all the answers, so why did I stick my face out? Answer: To get it poked.

This went on for about fifteen questions, all the way back to the temple steps, and by that time my teeth were getting pretty well loosened up.

But not my tongue.

"Take him inside," said the lieutenant. "Von Darsk will enjoy visiting with him. Here, imposter, just for good measure."

That was my cue to stick my face out again, and I did it, following through with a quick duck under the passing cyclone. The lieutenant's fist threw a pretty circle through the air and smacked into another guard. For a minute I thought I'd sparked off a free-for-all that would give me an exit.

"Not so fast, American," said the guard who had just had the pleasure of knocking the lieutenant out cold. "You've still got an interview with the boss on your docket. There seems to be a slight misunderstanding about a silver cane."

I NEVER guessed there could be so many of these guards until this little pleasure tour took me through the temple. Just picture a maze of escalators operating at various speeds; guess for yourself which ones lead above or below, and which ones to deep dungeons or wells of acid. It's a safe bet that you'll board the wrong one without guards to guide you, and even so, you'll not be too sure. However, once you get down about two levels below the bargain basement, you'll find yourself in a dank-smelling, dimly lighted hall, said smells related to plates of food and bottles of ale and the tables full of noisy, drowsy, or quarrelsome customers, these being Von Darsk's private army of guards.

Two rooms farther on, where the stone walls have been ornamented with panels of green marble, you know you're coming to the sanctum of the temple's boss.

The name VON DARSK, you'll notice, is cut in black marble over the triple doorway with the black marble pillars. No, those letters aren't stained with red, that's just your eyes that got smeared in a fight with the guards.

"Can I mop my face with a handkerchief?"

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Wrong question. One of the guards hadn't got in his share of the licks and was just waiting for an excuse.

In spite of my blood-smeared face, the passing scene impressed me. Here was a point of interest: a narrow catwalk in the form of a long, inclined plane came right down into this sub-sub-basement hall, and there was a pretty good line of traffic on it. The cats must have used it for a thoroughfare to come down here and report to headquarters. This channel tunnelled right through the walls. A man might have crawled from this room all the way to an exit somewhere on the facade, I presumed—or could he? That arched passage into the library beyond was about fourteen inches high, a nice size for full felines but a rather tight squeeze for, say, a heavyweight wrestler.

A cat conference was on, by George!

I knew what was going on, thanks to Muriel. However, I was much too groggy to guess what it was all about.

"Here he is, sir, in good condition," said the guard who had last swung at me.

"Set him down. Where's the cane?" came the low, gravelly voice of one of the men.

He was a huge hogshead of a creature with long, shaggy, black-and-gray hair hanging down to his shoulders. He didn't look anything like a mystic; he had none of that deep, penetrating, hypnotizing, overpowering appearance that I had anticipated. He reminded me of a big giant out of a fairy story—the fellow with a wide leather belt and heavy leather boots, and a fat, leathery face with a nose like a saddlehorn. He was whiskery and old and nervous, his eyes were watery, and he was in a bad humor. He drank continously, so that one guard was kept busy waiting on him.

This, then, was Von Darsk, the master of the temple and the trainer of the cats.

He wasted only a glance on me and went right on studying the big fancy mirror in his hand.

"Hushhh!" he would say, when anyone started to talk. "Hushhh!" The skulls hanging around the walls would vibrate from his hushes.

The man who sat with him had his back turned to me. This was, of course, Broko Blue. He had found his way past the barricade of guards and trouble that I had left him, and now he was helping Von Darsk communicate with the cats.

My knees began to sag, and I mumbled to my escorts that I was about to drop.

"Set him down, I said," Von Darsk yelled.

It wasn't only the skulls that vibrated, but also the stovepipe wire from which they were strung to the ceiling. I'd counted twenty-three of these objects when I discovered that Von Darsk had turned to look at me. He gave an ugly smile.

"Pick out a spot for yourself, American. We'll string you up next week."

CHAPTER XV

The Feline Torture Act

THE guards liked that. They started hee-hee-ing, but Von Darsk hushed them and the cat cummunications went on.

Broko Blue turned his chair angrily and tossed his hand mirror to the couch.

"I don't like it," he said. "She's too smart. She's going to be a lot of trouble. You haven't whipped her enough."

"Savin' that pleasure for you, Broko," Von Darsk chuckled.

"I've had enough of these cats. Bring in some new ones." Broko kicked at

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the ones around his feet and they scampered up the incline, through the miniature arch and away. Broko stomped across to a marble panel and pressed a button. It must have operated some sort of a cat-call out in the yard. A few minutes later five or six cats sauntered down the incline, looking as if they knew more than they cared to tell. But that was only my guess; and it goes to show quickly I'd developed a sound respect for these creatures.

Each cat picked a skull for himself, jumped up on it and sat there as if it were an ostrich egg waiting to be hatched.

It wasn't easy to see the red smoke under the full blaze of electric lights, and Broko wanted to snap off a few switches. He and Von Darsk struck up some trifling disagreement every few minutes.

Broko Blue was tall, rather slender, quite nervous, and as surly as he dared to be. You know, one of those sullen dogs that let you know with every word and mannerism that they're being halfway civil only as a special concession.

The guards hated him, I could tell. Some arrogant and over-bearing people give you a sugar coating of pleasantries; if Broko Blue had any such talent, he saved it for the King and the palace.

As I sized things up, these guards were, after all, a pretty shrewd bunch; in my painfully battered head I knew that they were holding on with Von Darsk a hundred percent, giving Broko all the rope he asked for, sacrificing Muriel and the King and all of Kadenza in the bargain—*but keeping mum about the whole thing*—knowing that they'd be on top after the dogpile was shovelled under.

The cats crawled down and went merrily on their way, and Von Darsk and Broko Blue went to work with their mirrors.

The mirrors hummed with a little low talk. Once I thought I could recognize the voice of Muriel. Again, I suspect I was the one doing the talking.

Yes, they were bringing back some echoes of our garden scene!

"There you are," Broko snarled. "It's like I said—she's too damned smart. You never should have let her have a mirror in the first place."

"Dry up," said Von Darsk. "You can't argue with those two old ladies. Anyway you've still got your plan, even if she is onto it."

Broko's eyes and ears took in the mirror with anxiety for another minute, then he shook his head. "She never does say which she'll choose."

"Maybe that's up to you." Von Darsk gave a gruff laugh. "This American didn't do so bad."

BROKO turned and looked at me with a very sour face. I was something pretty contemptible in his eyes. Something told me my time was coming.

"Where's the cane?" he suddenly shouted. "He still had it when he walked walked off—see?"

Von Darsk leaned across to compare mirrors, and he nodded. They were closing in on me.

"Get me my cane!" Broko pounded his fists against the wall. "I'll see her yet tonight, but you've got to find my cane. Why don't you make him tell what he did with it? Get busy with some of those torture machines you're always bragging about."

It seemed that these two old ladies had already been on the scene and had spoken their little piece for tonight: Muriel was to have no more callers. That, according to Von Darsk, was that.

But as for the missing cane, a touch of torture might serve to jog my memory.

Von Darsk touched another bell, and

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the guards ushered me into what they called the "headache room" and locked me in. They and Broko Blue watched me through a barred window; but as soon as the torture commenced, Broko went back to rejoin Von Darsk at the mirrors.

This torture business is like anything else—all a matter of your mental attitude. If you go into it expecting to have a bad time and be half killed before you get through, you'll probably have a bad time and be half killed. On the other hand, if you square your shoulders and go into it with a smile and tell yourself "This is going to be fun" —you're in for one helluva surprise.

They turned loose fifteen cats, more or less, and I'd rather have had mountain lions. These fifteen cats were charged with a full cargo of headaches. All the headaches you hear in one evening of radio commercials wouldn't begin to tell the story.

Don't ask me how long these cats had been loaded or whose grief they were carrying. All I know is, every one of them wanted a skull, and they wanted it now.

Well, I had just one skull to offer—not the one I'd hung over my back, for that had been removed before they put me in this dungeon, but my own—nature's original hat-rack adorned with a goodly quantity of barber bait.

These fifteen cats pounced like fifteen starved lions straight for my scalp.

Consider the mathematics of my situation. A head has a given area which diminishes slightly as the hair is removed. Fifteen cats are fifteen potential powerhouses capable of operating a total of sixty levers of clawing, each with a reciprocal frequency of three hundred strokes per m. Not even by Bronx subway standards could more than ten cats anchor on a man's skull at one time. But all fifteen could turn on their powerhouses and try, and they did. The harder they tried, the less scalp there was to hang onto.

FOR the next ten minutes I flung cats and swung cats and kicked cats. I jumped on cats, wrestled with cats, bit cats, struck cats, cracked cats' heads together. If that old gag about cats having nine lives had never been coined, I'd have coined it now. They wouldn't die, they wouldn't even be stunned; and so, more than anything else, I ran from cats.

"Bring him out. Call them off."

It was over. Broko and Van Darsk were laughing, and it was nice to see them so friendly. It wasn't my performance, however, that had made them happy, but something they'd read in their mirrors.

"Yes, that proves it. He was telling the truth. He doesn't know where the cane is."

I breathed a premature sigh of relief. It seemed that they had learned the truth from some skull, who had got it from some cat, who had observed me when I was caught under the light and my horse strayed away and I discovered my cane was gone.

"That simplifies matters," said Broko Blue.

"It means," said Von Darsk, "that we don't need him for anything. He's no more use to us. But what he knows could blow us up sky high, Broko."

Yes, it was beautiful to see the way these two could reach an understanding.

"What'll we use?" asked Broko.

"I'll see what the electrician has on tap."

"Don't get him started," said Broko. "He'll want to repair that old electric chair, and he'll waste all day tomorrow getting it ready."

They discussed the matter. It was tomorrow already, they noted by their

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watches—only an hour until dawn.

The lieutenant now came forward to whisper something to his boss, and a light of extreme pleasure shone on Von Darsk's grizzly face.

"Oh, that? I almost forgot," said Von Darsk. "Does our inventor have it all set up? . . . Good! We'll see what those steel teeth can do."

The whole party loaded into a car for an early morning drive into another part of the forest, and I was the guest of honor.

CHAPTER XVI

A Man's Last Thoughts

THEY tied me to a tree.

You've seen movies like that, and maybe you've marvelled, as I have, at the way some of those movie knots can be loosened up if the movie hero wriggled and squirmed enough. I wonder what kind of knots those are. These guards didn't know any knots like that.

The rope they used on my wrists would have held an elephant, and it held me. They gave me all of six knots on my ankles, added some more around my knees, then bound me around the waist until I couldn't swallow or take more than a quarter of a breath. When they got through I was tied.

That was all. They drove off and left me.

It has been a nice time of morning to stand here and muse upon the beauties of nature. Dawn in the forest, the mists of night lifting, the birds awakening.

But there has been one object—one symbol of civilization—to mar this otherwise pure and unadulterated hunk of nature. As the shafts of morning light seeped in to touch each tree trunk, first with twilight gray, then with the full bright gold of sunlight, this one object became more and more offensive to my artistic eye.

It gradually took on the sharp lines of a mammoth shiny red tractor.

Attached to it was what I judged to be a portable sawmill . . .

The first two or three hours of this bright and cheerful morning have now elapsed. I am still right here, and am not very comfortable.

I've been wondering about a lot of things, such as life and death, and I've been asking myself whether I would have come to this if I had been a pessimist instead of an optimist. A vegetarian instead of a beef-eater. A lover of symphonies and operas instead of a jazz addict. A democrat and a Presbyterian and a Harvard man instead of—

But you're interested in that portable sawmill, and so am I; well, here is a brief description of how it works.

It cuts down trees.

At this very moment it is eating its way through a three-foot trunk.

Not to be too technical, I'll simply add that it is the most completely automatic sawmill I ever saw. I've observed it only from a distance, of course, since I am not at liberty to move toward it, and it is very deliberate and methodical in its movement toward me.

THE guard, doubtless the inventor of Von Darsk's mention, started the machine soon after daybreak. He watched it for several minutes to be sure it needed no supervision. Apparently it doesn't. It saws timber in an ever-enlarging circle. It is controlled by a wire which unwinds from a huge spool mounted on a stump. With each round the radius of its circle increases about twenty-four inches.

The most interesting feature is the giant circular saw which extends out-

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ward from the body of the tractor. It is mounted horizontally, you understand, and is about as high as my waist, and eats its way through everything in its path.

It is very musical, this giant twelve-foot disc. It hums like a generator, and when its teeth spin into the big three-foot trunks it screams and whines, then tones down to a heavy groan, then comes out with a whine rising to the shrill scream again. Next, there's a great crashing of timber.

The inventor was quite ingenious, in my opinion, in his devices for rolling the falling timber into the circle and stripping the branches that would otherwise interfere with the control wire on the next round. Looking back on the mammoth tractor's path, I see fallen trees lying in a neat circular design like floating logs in an eddy.

The last five times around that big saw threw sawdust at me, and the last time it was a regular shower-bath. My swollen eye and crosshatched scalp are pretty well filled.

I've got it figured out that there'll be three more of these sawdust baths. A man in my position can afford to devote some thought to geometry—circumferences of circles and such. Just now I'm particularly engrossed in some calculations on distance and time. Each round that this tractor makes is wider than the last, and therefore takes more time. But just how much more is what I'm trying to approximate.

It's an interesting problem, and I believe I'll stop and concentrate awhile . . .

CHAPTER XVII

Where, Oh, Where Is Eddie?

I'M Doris Jastrow, one of the three Americans who happened to be in the little-known kingdom of Kadenza this season.

My story begins on my fourth day in the great forest of Kadenza—the day after that eventful afternoon when Eddie Trent and I met the famous Mr. Holly.

Yes, *the* Mr. Holly, from Hollywood, the writer of the nine best fantasy movies of the past nine years.

On this particular morning Mr. Holly drove up in his Rolls and honked just as we finished breakfast in the woodsman's cottage.

"Rehearsal at the old pavilion at ten," Mr. Holly called. "If any of you are ready, jump in and ride over with me."

That was too good to miss. I turned to the King. "I'll let Eddie drive you over. I must have a talk with Mr. Holly—about your future as an actor."

"Ah, my future!" The impetuous little King of Kadenza was feeling his pre-Hollywood oats more than ever. He had played the role of tramp so cleverly, a few days before, that the crusty old woodsman and his wife had been taken in.

"My future—yes, do talk with Mr. Holly. But remember, don't let him know that I'm the King."

"We're all keeping your secret; don't worry, Your Majesty," said Maud Slade, the funny English spinster who happened to be one of our party.

"And be sure you bring Eddie, or vice versa," I repeated to King Lenzono.

Eddie hadn't made his appearance yet this morning, and we'd all joked about him at breakfast, saying that he must have preferred to sleep in a straw-stack or a tree instead of this woodsman's barn loft.

All the same I had a twinge of worry about Eddie as I got into the front seat with Mr. Holly.

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We reached the pavilion ahead of all the others, and Mr. Holly called me a good sport when I pitched in and helped arrange the benches in the shade of the dilapidated roof.

"I'm lucky," said Mr. Holly, "to find so many willing actors out here in the forest. As you know, I came to this region in search of some new fantasy atmosphere."

He was a rather pudgy man, middle-aged, with a very interesting face, and the deepest, most expressive eyes. "The mysterious Mr. Holly" they called him, you know.

"Forests are full of mysteries for a man like you, I suppose."

"Indeed they are. Do you remember, I was pursuing one on a bicycle yesterday. Her name is Muriel. That's as far as I got. However, I invited her to come here today, though I'll be surprised if she does, she's such a frightened little deer—"

"D-e-e-r or d-e-a-r, Mr. Holly?"

"There," said Mr. Holly, "I'll add that line to my play. There are always changes to be made, and that's why I'm bringing together this dummy cast to go over the lines."

Here was my chance to give the King another build-up. King Lenzono's greatest ambition was to act, and I thought him deserving of every chance.

"Again?" said Mr. Holly. "Either this young man is a real actor or else you're personally fond of him; I'm not sure which."

"Both," I admitted.

"What was the name? Len—"

"Just Len. If he ever gets to Hollywood they'll change his name anyway."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Miss Jastrow. If he's so keen about acting, I'll give him the hardest part in the whole cast. It's the villain—an assassin. I was going to do it myself, but this will free me to make notes. Can he read quite well?"

"Read? Certainly."

"You never know about these backwoods people. Very well." Mr. Holly made a note of it. "I'll give Len the nasty job of plotting the murder of the King, and we'll see how much feeling he can put into it."

"The murder of the King? Oh—" I was a trifle dubious.

A HORSE wandered along the road and up toward the pavilion, grazing sleepily.

"Get out, horse," said Mr. Holly. "This play doesn't call for a horse."

There was something long and shiny caught in the horse's mane. Mr. Holly walked up to Dobbin and jerked it loose, and what should it be but a very beautiful silver cane ornamented with the head of a seahorse.

This was a very odd find, the very sort of thing, apparently, that could sidetrack Mr. Holly for a quarter-hour's idle speculation.

I had stated to read his manuscript; but now I must listen while he asked all sorts of unanswerable questions.

Where could that cane have come from? Who in this forest would carry such a cane? How could anyone allow such a precious object to stray away with a horse? Could the owner also be the owner of such a broken-down old work-horse?

"Would you like me to get on him and ride?" I suggested. And see which way he starts to go home?"

"A capital idea. You're a good sport, Miss Jastrow. I'll keep the cane here. Don't go far. The rest of the cast should be here right away."

So I got on the horse, bareback, slapped him on the shoulder and off we went.

It was a beautiful day to ride through the forest. Sunshine shifting down

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through the leaves, birds twittering, the softest whisperings of little breezes, and from somewhere miles away the faint sounds of a whining sawmill.

"This," I said to myself, "is the life," and I don't mind adding that I was tempted to ride old Dobbin, or whatever the name might be, right into the deepest woods. I hoped he knew where he was going.

I rode to the crest of a grassy hill and could look back through the trees and see the pavilion. No other cars had arrived, so I was tempted to ride on.

From this vantage point I could see for miles. Dobbin was taking me southwest, and that cabin down the slope looked very much like the woodsman's where our party was staying.

Back to the northeast was the pavilion, and farther on a steep, wooded hill that must have hidden the old temple from view. If so, it was only a couple of hills beyond the pavilion, though we had reached it by a long roundabout road yesterday. I resolved to go back in there and see the place. My confidence in Eddie was growing. You never know, at first, about these talkative fellows. But I must admit he was quick to fly into those dangerous cats.

My line of vision to the northeast took in a little dot of interest on the forested slope three or four miles away. A little circle of dust was rising out of the trees. Evidently that was where the sawmill's whine was coming from—and as I watched, there was a stir in those far-off tops of dark green, indicating that trees were being felled.

MY VIEW disappeared. The old horse broke into a lazy trot toward this farmyard down the southwest slope. To my surprise, it was our own woodsman running out to greet me with a lusty "Hey, you! Where have you been with my horse?"

I was right back where I started from.

To my further amazement the rest of the party hadn't started for the pavilion yet. The King was playing farmer for his own amusement, apparently. How ludicrous! There he stood in an open end of the barn loft scratching around in the hay with a hay-fork that was twice too big for him.

The King is about five feet tall, and since he's shaved off his waxed cats' whiskers for this incognito adventure, you keep mistaking him for a half-grown boy. Maud Slade and I have decided he must be over thirty, but he seems so very young and innocent.

"Here's your horse, and thanks for the ride," I said to the slightly flabbergasted woodsman, who had evidently thought someone had stolen it. "Tell me, have you put the King to work making hay?"

"He's looking for his friend Trent," said the woodsman.

"Hasn't Eddie shown up for breakfast yet?"

"He's missed breakfast, and he's about to miss dinner."

"What about the car?"

"It hasn't been moved."

Now I was worried, even though Eddie wasn't the sort of man it's easy to worry about. I climbed half way up the ladder to the loft and called the King over for a conference.

"Good morning—oh, pardon me—we've already had our good morning."

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Looking for Trent. I thought he might have got lost in this hay in the night. I haven't seen him at all."

"Where did you talk with him last?"

"Here in the loft last night as we were retiring," said the King.

"Do you recall your conversation?"

"I was very sleepy. Let me think—

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skulls, cats?"

"Did he tell you that we found the old temple yesterday and that we started to walk over to it when some vicious cats attacked us?"

"They jumped at your heads!" the King exclaimed.

"I remembered you'd had Eddie bring a skull for protection, so I tossed that to them and they left us."

The King stroked his chin with a straw. "Strange, isn't it?"

"It's one of those things that won't let you rest," I said. "Apply your theories of phrenology to Eddie and tell me—is he the sort of person who could fall asleep and forget a curiosity like that when he knows the answers are waiting out here somewhere in the forest?"

"I've got it!" The King smacked his hands together. "Eddie Trent never went to bed last night. He went out with his skull looking for cats."

"Maybe you're the one that's psychic," I said. "What if he went to that temple by himself? Would he be all right?"

"That temple," said the King, thoughtfully, "is one place I've never seen. A few of my police used to go there, but I can't recall that any of them ever came back."

He said it so dreamily that I didn't know whether to believe him or not.

"Wherever Eddie went, he went there on the woodsman's horse," I said, "and he's had some sort of encounter with a man who carries a silver cane with a sea-horse head, and he copped the cane for a souvenir."

"A sea-horse cane? That's very familiar," said the King. "I see a sea-horse cane every day at the palace. But a cane in the forest—"

"Whatever happened," I said, "the horse and the cane got away, but Eddie didn't!"

"Where's the cane?"

"Over at the pavilion. Mr. Holly kept it."

"All aboard for the pavilion!" the King shouted. He made a daring movie leap from the end of the loft and landed on the rear end of old Dobbin, who should have broken into a gallop but couldn't rise to the occasion. Anyway, there was a glint in the King's eyes that told me he had just been inspired to do a western movie when he got to Hollywood.

WE ALL piled into the King's taxi: Maud Slade, in her buggish green and striped shorts and blouse; the woodsman and his wife in their work-clothes, the King in his prided hayseed creation. My chauffeur's uniform entitled me to the seat at the wheel, and I bore down on the foot-feed all the way to the pavilion. My hunches seldom fail, and just now I was dead certain that Eddie Trent was in real trouble.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Role for "Len"

"WHERE'S your actor, Miss Jastrow? I want to see him first," Mr. Holly called.

"He's calling for you, Your Majesty," I said to the King.

"Sssh. Call me Len," the King whispered, and he bounded out of the car and onto the pavilion platform.

"You're Len?" said Mr. Holly, giving the King a brisk handshake. "I'll put you to work at once. This role is difficult, but Miss Jastrow tells me you'll handle it. Here, take the manuscript; go off into a corner by yourself, and see what you can make of it."

The effect was electric. Imagine a steel bullet shooting through the air full speed until a magnetic field catches it

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and, zingo, it spins around to a dead stop. King Lenzono was that bullet.

Mr. Holly *had* him, and what did it prove? Did it prove he was meant to be an actor, not a king?

As he started off with the manuscript, something attracted him out of the corner of his eye. It was the sea-horse cane under Mr. Holly's arm. He turned.

"You understand," said Mr. Holly, "that you're to be the villain. Over here on page thirteen you'll find the key to your evil character. To get into the spirit of such evil you'll have to banish all else from your mind."

Mr. Holly emphasized his words by tapping the manuscript with the handle of the cane.

"I'll do it," said the King, and he picked up a bench and went off toward the woods to banish everything else from his mind.

Some of the other volunteer actors arrived, and Mr. Holly turned his attention to them. Which gave me a chance to stay in the car and have a serious talk with Maud Slade and the woodsman and his wife.

"Have you heard any more news on the radio?"

"It's terrible," said Miss Slade. "The rumors have been getting worse every day. Now the whole country is getting angry. The rumors keep twisting."

"His enemy at the palace isn't missing a trick," said the woodsman. His wife began to cry. She was sure we ought to do something.

"At first," said Maud Slade, "I thought he should go right back and face them. If he'd just tell them he was going away to practice acting—"

"No, that would spoil everything for him," I said. "As a king he'd never have a chance to act. Incognito is the only way. That's why we've got to stand by him now. We're not going to let him down, are we?"

They were all with me, and they renewed their pledge to see him through. Maud Slade put her hand on her heart and made a very sentimental pledge to be true to him forever and ever. These love scenes she'd been playing with the King were having their affect.

The woodsman's wife sobbed softly; it was so dreadful, she said, to think that the people of Kadenza could be made to turn against such a sweet, good-hearted ruler. Now that she knew him she felt like a mother to him—

"But just listen to what they're saying on the radio. Everyone is asking what crimes are going to be found out, and some of the police at the capital are afraid he *will* come back—and run into a mob of angry people."

"We mustn't let him go back until something is done," said Maud Slade.

And with that opinion I quite agreed. The palace was a powder keg.

FOR the good of both the King and his country there was, at present, only one thing for us to do: keep him away from his palace troubles. We'd continue to steer him away from the radio, we'd get that silver cane and hide it; we'd try to keep every thought-carrying cat out of his sight.

In other words, we'd back Mr. Holly to the limit and keep the King acting.

And so pledging ourselves, we put the good of the nation ahead of everything else. First things first. It was the only way. But it cost my heart most heavy grief. Grief for my very good friend and fellow American, Eddie Trent.

Poor Eddie! Where was he this morning and what had befallen him?

If I had gone to King Lenzono crying for protection for Eddie, the King would have hurried back to his palace, heedless of the risk—and the result, I fear, would not have been a rescue, but an assassination.

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If Eddie was in danger, I was the one to come to his aid.

"Oh, Miss Trent," said Mr. Holly, as my companions and I got out of the car, "I'm afraid I'll have to prevail upon you to take the part of the maiden in distress after all."

"The girl from the temple hasn't come? I'm so sorry.

"If she isn't here within an hour, we won't wait," said Mr. Holly. "Almost everything else is ready, the coffee and doughnuts included."

"I'll skip lunch," I said, thanks to a sudden inspiration. "Let me drive around to the temple and see if I can't prevail upon the girl, since she's a natural for the part; may I?"

"You're a good sport." Mr. Holly gave me a friendly wink and then a quick look of warning. "Will you be all right? I ran into a terrible flock of cats yesterday. Positively weird."

"I'll have to take a chance," I said, and off I went.

After parking I threaded my way cautiously along the footpaths and kept my eyes on the low-hanging branches for signs of trouble. Somehow I got all the way to the temple steps without the least bit of trouble.

Mr. Holly couldn't have failed to think of this fantastically designed facade in terms of mystery movies. Its chalky ivory stones were like a weather-beaten outcropping of rocks on the hillside, and it was impossible to tell where the temple ended and the hill began.

It was also difficult to guess which of these shadowy openings was meant to be the entrance. I had seen four or five guards scattered around the grounds, but they had pretended to be shy about meeting company, so here I was ready to enter without a reception committee.

No doubt every modern visitor to this relic of ancient architecture did what I did—look for a doorbell and then feel foolish for thinking of anything so modern.

It was an awkward situation. The opening that looked inviting was a rectangular aperture with no door of any sort to fill it. I looked in and caught sight of a lighted room at the end of a long dark corridor.

You can't make any impression rapping against a stone wall. I looked up at the receding shelves of stone above me. Several recesses formed by the curious architectural design gave the appearance of doors, and I found myself ascending one tier another another, only to be disappointed.

I returned to the entrance to the lighted room.

"Hello! Hello-o-o-o! Is anyone here?" No answer except a long hollow echo. "May I come in?"

Silence gives consent, they say. I walked in.

MY footsteps brought five or six cats to life and they came running toward me out of the comparative darkness. I gave them the right of way and they raced outdoors.

For the next several steps I imagined nothing but cats. But the way seemed to be clear, and I advanced as bravely as I could, in spite of a pounding heart.

I wanted to call "Eddie!"—but that would probably be the shortest way to trouble. If I had only known the name of the black-haired girl—

Someone was following me—no?—then someone was ahead of me—or what had I heard? It sounded like the snapping of a light switch.

The lighted room was only a few feet ahead. I quickened my pace. I was about to call again—

My feet rolled out from under me and I fell. I threw out my arms in a vain effort to catch some support, but

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down I went—into a cushion!

I can't tell you whether I screamed. Padded levers were closing around me, and I think one of them pressed down over my mouth in time to stifle my voice, but it all happened so quickly.

A strange comparison, perhaps, but in that awful moment I wondered how a person would feel if he were to be suddenly converted into a mummy. No advance warning—no questions asked—just click, click and there you are, with ankles and knees and shoulders and head bound against a cushioned board, and then you're sliding down a long chute toward the center of a pyramid.

I was moving swiftly down a winding incline; that is, the contraption I was bound to was rolling like a coaster wagon down a steep hill. If that padded arm had not been pressing down on my mouth, there would have been one prolonged scream like a fire whistle.

Take my word for it, I was scared.

CHAPTER XIX

The Mirror Show

LIKE the man falling from the skyscraper, what I dreaded most was the sudden stop.

Actually I hadn't been hurt except for the severe blow to my pride. My face couldn't have been much redder if there had been a "Danger, High Voltage" sign and I had deliberately walked into it.

The incline levelled off into a room deep down, and I coasted across the floor and stopped with a gentle bump against the wall.

The scenery right above my bewildered eyes consisted of several skulls hanging from the ceiling by wires.

"Ho, ho. We have company," said a very coarse voice, and his final word caused a sympathetic vibration in the polished ivory skull nearest me.

I couldn't see where the voice came from until the padded levers were jerked free by an attendant. I sat up and found myself face to face with one of the most picturesque individuals I ever laid eyes on.

Grotesque? He was the image of a storybook giant, a huge fellow with long, unkempt gray locks and rough whiskers. He looked as if he would gladly eat me alive.

"Come over here, child," he said, beckoning me to a chair with a slight movement of his leathery hand. "I'm Von Darsk. Who are you?"

"My name is Doris—Doris Jastrow."

"Ho, ho, speak up! What was that last name? Jastrow? Never heard of you before...Here from America? Ah! ...Lieutenant!"

One of the four guards seated on a bench just outside the arched doorway came to attention.

"Some refreshments, for Miss Jastrow—from *America*."

This wasn't bad, I kept telling myself. Maybe he's not so rough as he looks. Maybe he'll be friendly—like a cat to a mouse.

Refreshments came and I refused them.

Several of the guards came in to stare and ask if there was anything they could do to make me uncomfortable. Von Darsk snarled at some and swore at others; to still others he gave a severe dressing-down on discovering that they hadn't yet attended to the killing of a certain prisoner.

They talked about this killing in double talk for my benefit. They were trying to terrorize me and I knew it.

However, if this prisoner hadn't been killed yet—if this prisoner was by any chance my Eddie—

It wasn't. It was a cat. Some very special cat. Their double talk lost in-

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terest for me, but now the real terror set in. For if this cat was the only prisoner that hadn't been taken care of—

I couldn't talk. I seemed to be freezing with an awful paralysis. They must have decided I was ill. They called in two old ladies, who led me into another room.

THERE were a few skulls mounted on pedestals, and cats came and went continuously, and these old ladies paid no attention to them, but their own behaviour was curious. I thought at first they were looking at themselves in hand-mirrors. They were certainly looking at something; but why should they carry on so? They would gasp, "My, my! For Kadenza's sake... Just look, would you!...of all things!"

If I had been sick they'd have let me die. They were so completely engrossed in this mirror game that I thought it was a mania. Von Darsk had evidently meant to have them give me some smelling salts, or a dose of poison, I'm not sure which. They weren't as obedient to Von Darsk as the guards were. Now that I was back here in what was obviously their part of the temple, judging from all the colored pottery and knick-knacks and fancy work that cluttered the room, they paid no further attention to me.

Maybe it was a good thing. I had time to regain my composure. I had been terribly scared and was still in a pretty bad case of nerves. But here I was, still alive in possession of my faculties, and enduring no torture other than my own thoughts. So I pulled myself together.

Were they breathing that perfume? Were there electric fans inside those skull incense-burners—or were they incense-burners? I took a deep breath of the dank basement air and decided they were not. But for some strange reason streams of pinkish smoke were wafting from the hollow eyes and the interstices of teeth and bone.

"My, my...isn't it disgusting?... They can't be in love...but they must be or they wouldn't say such things... Just look! Well, for Kadenza's sake."

This chatter got me. Those two old gossips seemed to be collecting the inspiration for all oh-ing and ah-ing out of the mirrors with which they were combing the red smoke.

"Now she's pretending she loves him ...but why does she want to talk like that? She's too prim and old-maidish, and he's too young...Are they really going to kiss?"

Now I was aware that the humming came from the mirrors, not from fans hidden in the skulls. Could it have been voices? These women were certainly getting some messages from somewhere. Who was the man in this prolonged exercise of wooing? Not my friend Eddie, I hoped.

Who was the girl? Surely not that mysteriously beautiful young girl—Mr. Holly's maiden in distress?

"Would you like to see?" one of the old women asked. They gave me a hand-mirror and told me to catch some of the smoke streams.

"The cats are always bringing in a show to our skulls," one of them explained, "and it comes together out of this smoke—"

"On the mirror," the other added, "so all we have to do is sit and listen and watch."

"And that's all we do do," said one, "and we never get tired of it, because there's always something new. You never saw anything like these cats for getting around."

"You watch a while and you'll begin to see it clearer, and you can hear their talk, too."

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"Today's show is better than usual, it seems to me."

On this the two old ladies agreed.

AND so I was introduced to this uncanny process of communication; though I might always wonder how and why these electrical transformations could take place, it was perfectly evident they did. These marvelous felines, whom nature had denied the power of thinking, much less speaking, were wonderfully gifted with this special talent. They could gather through their delicate senses all the impressions from certain human conversations. And through some mysterious transformation, which, according to these old ladies, was as old and unexplainable as this temple itself, those impressions would find their way, through skull and smoke, back to a mirrored representation of their original form.

As I state these facts, looking back upon their weird manifestation, you would be misled if you assumed that any such fascinating phenomena could make me forget my fears for Eddie.

What I first saw in the mirror was that Eddie was not there. Several familiar faces appeared, but neither Eddie nor Mr. Holly's maiden was among them.

"Make the pictures show me Eddie Trent," I begged. "Can you find him in these skulls? Hasn't he been here? You know, a rather tall, good-looking American—"

All my pleading fell on deaf ears. When I tried to run away they locked the doors. Then I was forced to become calm, to wait, to hope. There was no use fighting, for I was completely at their mercy.

I watched the mirror, listlessly at first, then anxiously. Here were the actors at the pavilion—their faces, their gestures, their words. Yes, unfolding before me was the tragedy of Kadenza —Mr. Holly's play.

CHAPTER XX

Death to a Palace Guard

IT WAS a tragedy in more ways than one. To these old ladies Maud Slade was comical to the point of burlesque. She was tall, and the King was short; she was awkward in her attempts to make all the gestures when it went with the lines. You see, she'd volunteered to stand in for the maiden in distress. And so, in the early part of the play, she was reading love lines to the King, and vice versa.

For me the note of tragedy crept in when I saw that she was overplaying, to make it evident that she was *only acting* these sentiments, trying not to reveal that they really *were* her sentiments, which they were, I knew.

She was working hard, trying to satisfy Mr. Holly's clamor for more sincerity, yet holding herself back. The King, throwing himself completely into his part, was not aware of her dilemma. Probably nobody was, except me.

Then her difficulties sharpened—and I began to tremble for her, which was foolish of me, of course; for what I was seeing was past and done. It must have happened many minutes or even hours ago, for the cats had come back from the scene loaded with a "headache" of continuous impressions. My mirror views, oozing out of the skull on the pedestal, were comparable to a movie rolling out of a film; the worst that can happen is already there and nothing can change it.

Maud Slade's difficulties sharpened when she got in to the second act of the play. Now the King's villainy came to the fore. His villain's make-up had been retouched during the interval be-

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tween acts and he looked sinister indeed.

Costumes and make-up were constantly a part of the King's vacation personality, naturally; for at no time since he had left the palace did he ever allow himself to look like the King he was. Now a movie camera was being set up, and I knew he would cut a striking figure in his villainish mode.

The act was on. The King was portraying evil. He was doing well. As though he were born to evil.

"Splendid! Splendid!" came the humming echoes of Mr. Holly's enthusiasm.

And here it was, the scene that had struck me as being almost too difficult for the King to attempt.

The villain was plotting the assassination of the King.

The King played it very well, I repeat. He gave a powerful portrayal of the mad hate an assassin must feel when he decides the deed must be done.

I was as much a part of his audience, now, as those volunteer actors at the pavilion. They gathered close around the stage, drawn by the power of the drama.

Too pointed it was indeed. Where had Mr. Holly found his ideas? What did he know that had led him to write this assassination plot? The parallel between his fictitious kingdom and the real Kadenza was unmistakable.

That was what got Maud Slade. Her love for Lenzono, the real King, could not endure the hideous treacheries that were issuing from the lips of Len, the play villain. She knew what Lenzono did not know: that the phantom of a real assassination was abroad in the kingdom.

The King was directing one of his dire threats at her: "If you will not go into this plot with me, you, too, shall be a victim!"

And then it was that Maud Slade was led off the stage in a state of nerves.

MR. HOLLY was lost for words at first. I could read the deep concern in his face as if he was stopping to realize what a powerful scene he'd written.

There was an intermission and a lot of high compliments heaped upon "Len" for his effective acting. Perhaps I was the only one who realized that Maud Slade deserved similar praise; for those nerves were the price she paid for sticking to her pledge.

The marvelous felines came and went, and our mirror scenes shifted.

We caught a glimpse of Von Darsk and his lieutenant administering the final punishment to the one neglected prisoner—a cat. To all appearances it was just like any other cat. But according to the talk it was a traitorous beast—one of their prize specimens on which they had squandered many months of training—to what purpose? The cat had gone to the aid of the King.

I listened to the mirror vibrations of this poor beast undergoing mortal tortues. Von Darsk was ranting at it in his most brutal voice, while he applied hot irons to it.

"Salute! Salute again! Again! . . . Keep it up till you're fried to a cinder, you traitor . . . After all we did for you—yes, the palace will miss you. Things will be different now . . . Broko's worst troubles will be over . . . He'll be able to keep track of the King with you out of the way—yes, and his cane. Salute! . . . Faster! Faster!"

I couldn't come back to the mirror for several minutes after that. This, I knew, must have been the King's faithful guard that watched from the tree above the palace. So there was a

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marked difference in these felines—and some of them could be made to understand.

Messages came from the pavilion again. The play was moving along briskly through the second act when Mr. Holly stopped to inquire who had set up that movie camera. Everyone acted puzzled; everyone seemed to think Mr. Holly had done it for his own benefit.

The suspicions thereby aroused put a damper on the acting for several minutes. Mr. Holly ordered someone to turn the camera off and bring the film. But it was discovered that the camera was off and the film already gone.

Mr. Holly was in a rage, then, and he pounded the back of a bench with the sea-horse cane. He wasn't going to have anyone running off with his play. "Who took that film? Where is it?"

The woodsman and two or three other persons vaguely remembered having seen someone perform the act in question. Descriptions of the culprit varied; but there was agreement that the man left in a hurry and struck off down the trail—that he was tall and dark and middle-age. Someone thought he meant to take the camera too, but was afraid of distracting Mr. Holly. Someone else added that he was wearing a false face so that he had passed for one of the players.

The play went on, and Mr. Holly showed himself a director worthy of the name. He quickly set his anger aside instead of taking it out on his actors. And I could see that even these rank amateurs felt a new admiration and loyalty for him.

Next, my mirror show brought in the lovely face of the girl I had seen yesterday.

"Who is she?" I asked. "Where is she staying—here at the temple? Why don't you let me see her, please?"

"Why didn't you ask?" one of the old ladies retorted. "You'll find her out in the garden. Come on."

CHAPTER XXI

Princess Muriel's Confidence

PRINCESS MURIEL was her name, and Anatogga her country. Whether she had been the daughter of royalty or a child of the peasants of these forests could have made no difference in the most striking fact—that she had been blessed with rare beauty and charm. I understood perfectly why Mr. Holly had been so eager for her help with his play.

I wondered what effect she had had upon Eddie.

She was very young, hardly eighteen. To him she should have been a mere schoolgirl, a child. But something told me that it wasn't altogether his interest in this curious old temple that had brought him back here last night.

I was pondering these things while we were first getting acquainted. I wanted to introduce the subject of Eddie at once, but would she think I was concerned for his safety or that I was exhibiting jealousy.?

To have Muriel's confidence was the most important thing. Maybe I'm psychic or something; anyhow, right away I knew I had it. She was trusting me and I was trusting her.

She was giving me little hints of the ominous circumstances surrounding her own life. As a prisoner here since childhood she was awaiting whatever fate might have in store.

She, too, had been watching the recent happenings from the flow of smoke. The murder of the King's guardian cat had been like a blade through her heart. It was she who had given this remark-

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able cat most of its training. It was she, moreover, who had invested it with the fullest of sympathies and love for the King, so that it found its way to him and proved to him, through its uncanny intelligence, that it was a faithful friend looking out for his personal safety.

I listened, and at once I knew. Princess Muriel loved the King deeply.

"Did you know him when you were a child?" I asked.

"That is something I never talk about," she said. "You will remember that my country was Anatogga, and I could never speak of my childhood dreams if those dreams crossed the boundary into Kadenza. But forgive me, please. You came to ask about your friend, Mr. Trent, and I have told you the last I knew he was being escorted away from the temple. But that was early this morning, and the guards who accompanied him returned long ago."

"You believe that they have killed him," I said, reading it in her eyes.

At this moment one of the old ladies called us in to see what they were receiving through the mirrors.

We joined them, and I saw—first a spray of dust flying away from a mammoth circular saw, then the huge tractor that pushed it along the edge of the clearing, then trees falling, trees waiting to fall, and finally, Eddie!

He was hardly recognizable. He'd been showered with sawdust. He'd been hurt, too; one of his eyes was swollen shut and there were dark stains down the side of his head. He was bound to the tree with enough rope to hold a freight train.

The saw was coming toward him, a spinning blur of death.

The smoke passed over the surfaces of our mirrors and was gone for a moment, and when it came back the scene had changed to another part of the forest. The one feline observer of Eddie's fate evidently had not stayed to see the finish.

And all of this, I knew, must have happened many minutes, if not hours, ago. I was at the end of my strength and I collapsed.

I DO not know how Muriel got them to let me leave the castle. Nor do I know how she managed to get me back to my car. Perhaps I walked in unconsciousness. Perhaps some friendly guard helped the two of us to slip out.

I awakened to find myself at the wheel of the car. Muriel was slapping my face.

"You must wake up! You must drive! Please, Doris! You must!"

A snake would have broken his back following the weaving track that we made along that forest road. But as the wind whipped my face my hand steadied the wheel. Consciousness was returning, painfully clear, but I felt the overwhelming wish to faint again.

I remember driving into the pavilion grounds. Some of the cast had gone; the principals had just refreshed themselves with food and drink and were starting back to work. Mr. Holly gave them their cue and the play was on again.

I could not be sure what I had said to Muriel on our ride. Everything in my mind was a fog. The shock of Eddie's fate was upon me as if one of those falling trees had struck me down.

Muriel walked onto the stage and Mr. Holly smiled at her. I held my breath. Then, when she didn't speak a word about the cruel thing that had happened in the forest, I knew I had been talking to her all the way—I had been telling her what was done was done and that no sacrifice the King might make could change things.

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So there was Muriel joining the players, playing *her* part in the greater play of silence, to hide what was real and let the play go on.

And then Muriel and the King were looking very intently into each other's eyes.

"Keep the play going," Mr. Holly shouted. "Pick up that cue and start over. Those lines have got to move fast, Len."

Lenzono the Jumpy didn't hear. He was gazing at Muriel as if she were some attractive child that he had seen and taken completely into his heart a long time ago.

"All right, break it up," said Mr. Holly. "You're acting now, Len. You're all set for murder. You wanted her in on your scheme, but she's just handed you the slap of your life. You're incandescent with rage. It's murder, all right, and she's first on your list. Now, take it—"

Mr. Holly broke off with a gulp of surprise.

"What's the matter with him? The first real actor I ever discovered and suddenly he goes stone deaf! . . . Len! Len!"

Mr. Holly batted his eyes at his script and in bewilderment came over to my car.

"Miss Jastrow, take a look at this script. Tell me if you can see anything that tells the villain to call off the murder and substitute a kiss . . . Just look at them. It must be love at first sight . . . Were you ever in love, Miss Jastrow?"

I might have sat there watching the play all evening—without seeing or hearing a thing—if he hadn't asked me that last question.

Words are strange things. They can make you touch the starter and drive away at full speed without even knowing what hit you.

CHAPTER XXII

Doris, Bless Her Heart!

THIS is Eddie Trent speaking.

Eddie Trent, calling all mathematicians. Calling all mathematicians. Calling all—

But why do I call? I'm so deep in the forest I'd be a fool to call hogs. The only hogs that ever frequent this corner of Nowhere are Von Darsk's guards and torture feeders.

Now back to mathematics. If that twelve-foot circle-saw is doing 3000 r. per m. and the speed is reduced one-half every time the saw eats through a four-foot tree, how much will the speed be reduced if it eats through a two-foot tree with a one-foot thickness of man attached by a one-foot thickness of rope?

They say that the way to verify your answers is to stick around and observe the results, and that is what I have every expectation of doing.

Here it comes at last. Three trees left to go.

Two trees left to go . . . and what a rich odor of resin in that sawdust!

One tree—oh-oh, that sawdust is blinding me. I can hardly breathe. Listen to that big tree crash! Hey, I've got to sneeze.

I've got to sneeze and I can't possibly. That makes a fellow uncomfortable—to have to sneeze and can't. (Am I being ungrammatical here in my final moments? They always say your sins move in on you right at the last.)

Well, there goes the last tree. I'm next.

The inventor who put this traveling buzz-saw into action was an ingenious cuss, all right, but I could tell him a thing or two.

I've known all along, for instance, that he was going to have trouble with

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that wire control. Sooner or later a big tree was bound to come bouncing down with an extra long branch that would reach way out in front of the path and anchor that wire down.

I'm blowing the sawdust out of my eyes now for a clearer view of this unwelcome mishap.

Just as I thought. The tractor is being turned out of line by the very force that was meant to hold it in line. There she goes, cattawampus across the logs—cutting a cord, in the geometrical, if not the woodsman's, sense of the term.

Well, that upsets everything. Here I am right where I've been for hours and hours. My knees and ankles and feet still ache like slow fire, and they're still attached to the rest of me.

Now the tractor is cutting some new capers. It can't unwind any more. The wire is hooked over two points instead of one. So it's due to gather up fast, and that's what it's doing.

Zig, and after a minute's wait, zag. Now here she comes plowing right back over her course, and the topmast is gathering up wire like strands of taffy candy.

Oh-oh, there she goes. She's cut loose from all anchors now, and the loose wires are dragging.

Now why couldn't that galloping buzz-saw come my way? Am I poison or something? Why couldn't she cut right past the other side of my tree and shred up a few of my ropes? No?

No, she's off. She's bound for the tall timber, as the saying goes. She's cutting a few gentle curves that hint southwestern course, and now that no strings are attached she's showing a lazy man's tendency to leave part of the swath standing.

SO HERE I stand with a tree tied to my back. And, by the way, what happened to that sneeze? It went to sleep, I guess. With nothing else to do at the moment I'll follow suit . . .

Sundown and evening star.

The smell of fresh-cut timber.

I wonder how a horse likes to sleep standing up.

Could those be automobile lights bouncing over the stumps? That road is new—the stumps haven't been pulled—and who ever laid out the course must have charted it out of a bottle . . .

In a moment it all came back to me. That was the way the galloping circle-saw was hieing when last observed. You wouldn't think a car could make the return trip over such a rough trail.

But consider how one Doris Jastrow can drive. Sturdy stuff, Doris. But you should have seen her sobbing while she unbound my ropes and beat the sawdust out of me with a switch. She'd dust me a while and cry a while. I guess she was tired out from the rough drive.

At last I was free, and I took one full breath and sneezed. And down I fell like a log.

"I'll roll you over to the car," she said, "but you'll have to get in by yourself."

"By myself?"

"By yourself," said Doris.

"Could I, dearest, persuade you to get in with me?"

"And I thought you were dead," said Doris.

I thought she was going to start crying again, and I called her "dearest" and a few things like that, so she decided she'd get angry instead.

"A certain girl named Muriel tells me you fall in love much too easily," she said.

"Muriel? Muriel?"

"Get in and see if riding over these stumps doesn't jog your memory."

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CHAPTER XXIII

The King Hires Out

FOR stiff muscles, such as come from having a tree tied to your back for fifteen hours, you might recommend a shower and a thorough rub-down. I substituted a sawdust bath, as previously noted, and the sort of massage that comes with a ride over a detour of roots and stumps.

And so, along about two or three in the morning, when we finally drove into the woodsman's yard, I saw that I was going to live through, thanks to this particular miracle named Doris.

"There he is. He's back. She's brought him."

This was Maude Slade in the doorway with a night-light in her hand and a tremor in her voice. She came running out to us in a dressing robe and bare feet.

"Night mare," I said to Doris as we started to get out of the car.

"Who's having it, you or me?"

Maud Slade wasn't quite in hysterics; she held her voice down for fear someone would hear.

"Quick, Mr. Trent. You've got to get away from here. They're looking for you."

"Who? Pixies of gremlins?"

"Men," said Maud Slade. "Great big men with terrible looking eyes. They've been around this way twice already, and they wanted to know if there was an American staying here."

"What did you tell them?"

"Oh, I lied to them because I could see they were dangerous. I didn't know where to tell them you were, and I was afraid to guess for fear I'd tell them the right direction by mistake." Maud looked from one to the other of us and repressed a giggle. "I just knew you two were out spooning somewhere without a thought of danger."

I nudged Doris. "No thought of danger. Would you say she's psychic too?"

"We're coming in," said Doris. "Eddie's going to have some hot tea and a bath and a bed with a mattress."

"Oh, is he hurt? I took a first-aid course once."

"Wake up the woodsman's wife and have her get the teapot on," said Doris, "and if any men come around here disturbing the peace, we'll throw them in boiling water."

We gave Maud plenty of joshing for her jostled nerves, but I knew she was right, at that. It was risky for me to stay here. It was risky for me to be anywhere. Broko Blue and the temple men knew I was dynamite wrapped in lightning. What I'd learned about them just couldn't be allowed out of captivity.

The whole household kept watch for cars while I ate and drank and bathed and wrapped myself in the woodsman's winter overcoat and rolled into bed.

"There's a car coming," I heard someone say.

All our lights were off and I ordered everyone to stay away from the windows so the car lights wouldn't catch them. Then I said my hasty farewells to everybody and slipped out the rear door and made for the barn loft. If danger was coming, the King was the one to be warned.

"Hey, Lenzono!" I groped through the pitchblack loft and poked around in the hay with the handle of a pitchfork.

"Ugh! Don't do it—I don't deserve to die." This remark from one who was evidently having sweet dreams of assassination.

"Wake up, Len," I whispered. "Wake up and get dressed or there might be a real assassination. Someone's coming."

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"Where's my make-up kit?" said the King. "Is the car hidden? Where are my trousers? Scrape around that corner and fork me up a pair of shoes, will you?"

HE WAS coming to life quicker than most kings would have done under the circumstances. I doubt if there has ever been another king who could wake up in a hayloft at four a.m. and transform himself into a backwoods tramp in six minutes flat—though I've never looked up the statistics on this item.

But I'm not sure how we would have fared if this scare had been the real thing. Fortunately, it was not. The voice which came to us from the driver's seat, when this Rolls came to a stop, was that of Mr. Holly.

"Oh, Len," he cooed in the spirit of a dove. "Len-n-n-n! Are you here?"

I made my way back to the house so as not to reveal the King's hiding-place until I found out what was wanted.

"Oh, it's you. I'm looking for that actor named Len," said Mr. Holly. "He's a rather short, wiry fellow. I want to have breakfast with him. He told me he lived up this way. He's a farm hand, that's why I came early."

"He doesn't eat until after the milking," I said. "What's in the air?"

I saw that Mr. Holly was alone and so I invited him out to the barn where I thought the incognito King might be persuaded to receive guests at this hour.

"Are you up there, Len?" Mr. Holly called up to the loft. "I came to talk business. Did you know that you are now in the movies?"

"Hollywood!" the King gasped. "Hollywood!"

He stepped right out of the open end of the loft, and we had to pick him up. Mr. Holly brushed him off, and he was still gasping, "Hollywood!"

"I mean the local movies," said Mr. Holly. "You were in the news and you were preaching revolution."

"I? Revolution?" the King gulped.

"It was a sensational performance," said Mr. Holly. "You could tell it struck the audience quite a blow."

"*Capital* audience?"

"Yes, I drove in right after rehearsal. You see, after our disturbance about that movie camera this afternoon, I got to thinking. Either someone was trying to steal my play or someone was gathering news-reel material. So I drove into the capital to see, and I just got back."

"And they showed a movie of me, *acting?*"

"Just so. Your performance aroused the audience so that there was a pretty nasty free-for-all, and the manager and ushers had their hands full."

"I'm in the movies, Eddie! In the movies!"

I GROANED a couple of times, once for Doris. I knew she'd see stacks of trouble ready to blow all over the political barnyard.

"What, Mr. Holly," I asked, "did the—er—Len have to say in the movies?"

"It was great. He was reading some of the toughest lines in my play. He had the manuscript in his hands and a villainous look on his face that was a photographic masterpiece. The very sight stirred you to action."

"What kind of action?"

"Assassination, Mr. Trent," said Mr. Holly. "He presented the whole scene in which my fictional assassin argues himself into the decision to kill the King."

"And I put it over?" the King gasped.

"With all the effectiveness of a Hollywood star."

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"It sounds dangerous to me," I said, and I guessed the two listeners agreed with me—namely, Doris and Maud, hiding behind the fence to take in the whole show by dawn's early light.

The King asked about the high points of his appearance as eagerly as any movie star after his first feature picture.

Mr. Holly mentioned that there was only the trifling distraction of a cat crossing the rear of the stage.

"The cat brought a touch of comic relief," said Mr. Holly. "In fact, even the cat appeared to be interested in what you were saying."

"I wonder—" The King hesitated. "Tell me, did I look like myself?"

"You didn't look like anyone but the villain of the play." Mr. Holly's comment on that point was a great relief to all of us, I'm sure. Even so, it was nerve-shattering to realize that this film would circulate all over the kingdom.

Free advertising for Mr. Holly's coming play? Yes, he had a right to be very happy about it.

But what of Lenzono the Jumpy, already tottering on his throne?

What would this slanting blow from Len, the actor, do for the political fate of Lenzono the King?

"Len, they're going to offer you a job sometime today," said Mr. Holly. "Don't ask me who *they* are, for all I heard was rumors. But it seems that this new company owning these newsreel shots has agreed to use you. They need you for something, and today they're going to offer you a contract."

"Careful, Len," I said. "A woodsman like you better think twice before you set your pen to a contract."

"I know how to read and write," said the King, giving me a slight nudge.

"Mr. Holly," I said, "aren't you going to need Len for another rehearsal of your play this afternoon?"

"Very much. I'm inviting all of you to continue with me. You understand, of course, that I'm offering very little pay. Not until I return to America will I try to pick my regular cast."

"But you do need us temporarily—all of us, including Len."

"I need you all," said Mr. Holly.

"You'll have to count me out," said the King. "If these movie news men offer me a job, I'm going to take it. It's my chance to break into this field professionally."

"That's final?" Mr. Holly asked.

"Final," said Len, sticking a straw between his teeth.

I'm sure I heard Doris gasp, and I was afraid that Maud Slade would faint.

"Len," said Mr. Holly, "you've made the wise choice. Every bit of professional experience you get will be a step in the right direction. I hope the men who hire you won't keep you in the role of a revolutionist and an assassin. But if they do, put your whole soul into it."

CHAPTER XXIV

A Beard for Grandpa

DAYLIGHT brought us Muriel. Muriel brought us a loaded skull and a mirror. And these brought us news.

It gave you the feeling that these cats were very much like flies. You know—stop your car beside the highway on a barren prairie five miles from any house, get out your lunch and start in on a bread-and-butter-and-grape-jelly sandwich, and right away there's a fly—two flies—three. Before you finish there are fifteen or twenty.

Where did they come from? How did they know jelly would be served at that hour? Did they outrace the wind to make the appointment?

Well, these cats must have had some of the same unerring instinct, sense of

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smell, response to infinitely tiny vibrations of some sort that must accompany human emotions, or whatever the case might be; at any rate some of them seemed always to be present when any of their human customers were involved in any sort of excitement.

We gathered around the mirror, and the red smoke brought us Doris freeing me from the tree and helping me into the car. The mirror brought one of the guards, the inventor himself, arriving at the end of a zigzag trail through the forest. He was looking at the galloping sawmill. The darned thing had come to a stop within a few feet of a rocky ledge.

Out of gas—twenty feet too soon to answer the old question about an irresistible force meeting an immovable object.

The mirror movie showed much distress in the face of the inventor, who puttered around making notes on the necessary repairs.

Other mirror catches proved that the cats came to the temple with a report on my escape soon after the tractor dodged me. That was why the temple guards had gone to work last night scouring the countryside for me. I wondered where they were by this time. Spreading a net, no doubt.

"You'd better get back to America," said Maud Slade. It was becoming apparent that my position was imperiling everyone staying at the woodsman's cottage.

"I can't let the King blunder into that temple trouble alone," I said. "How long do you think it will take them to discover he's not an actor but a king?"

Maud Slade, Doris and I were lingering over our breakfast, talking with Muriel. The King had gone to his barn loft headquarters to put on the same villain's make-up that he'd worn for his movie acting.

"You're right," said Doris. "With the cats to give them his true emotions, he's stepping right into their death-trap."

"He knows what the cats can do," said Muriel.

"Let me get this straight," said Doris. "Yesterday when you and the King met, you seemed to know each other, even though he was in disguise. Did you know he was the King? Does he know that you are the Princess of Antoggia?"

"We have been friends," said Muriel, blushing slightly, "since the cats brought us into communication."

"But when you met him yesterday he was in disguise. Will others penetrate the disguise as easily as you did?"

"It is not likely," said Muriel. "You see, until yesterday we have had certain cats that gave us a private communication—cats which I trained. These were killed yesterday, soon after informing me that my friend was here in the forest, acting."

"If Von Darsk received the same message—"

"He didn't. These felines were too much imbued with my own sentiments ever to fail me."

MURIEL was doing her best to be optimistic, it was plain. This was her nature, and only through such hope and fortitude could she have endured these years of imprisonment.

But Muriel did not belittle the danger. She herself lived in the very clutches of peril—and even now, she reminded us, she must hurry back to the temple before the old women reported her prolonged absence to the guards.

The radio reports reached us before we went our separate ways. What Mr. Holly had reported earlier was now confirmed: The news "short" of a play being rehearsed in the forest had caused

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a tumult with the capital movie crowd.

The newspapers were said to be editorializing on this play. Had Mr. Holly come from America, or was he an agent from Anatogga trying to stir up trouble?

"Unless the capital bans this news short at once," said the radio news commentator, "very soon our whole country will be exposed to these firebrand speeches—with doubtful political consequences."

Then and there we decided. We were going to make the King give up his forest lark and get back to the palace. We'll all go with him to make sure he climbed the one hundred and forty-one steps with a military escort that would scare the shirt off Broko Blue.

But when we went to the barn loft we found that Lenzono the Jumpy was a jump ahead of us.

The bag of costumes and make-up were here, but the actor was gone!

"Look through and see what's missing," said Doris, "so we'll know what he's wearing."

"He's wearing orange and white socks,' I reported.

"Gracious!" said Maud Slade. "Is that all?"

"That's all with Kadenza colors. The rest is his hayseed-on-dress-parade, with the Hollywood villain superimposed. They'll never dig through all that to the naked truth," I said. "But how he can deceive the cats is beyond me."

Muriel's answer to that was—as I well remember—"Be completely calm and collected."

An hour later I went down the trail in a disguise of my own—a woodsman with a gray beard. I kept saying to myself, "When frightened, be calm. When cats attack you, be calm. When murder threatens, be calm. When the King mounts the stump and cries 'Down with the King!'—be calm. When Muriel the Beautiful smiles at you, be—oh-oh, let's be practical. Can a fellow set the rate of his pulse like a metronome?"

I hove up alongside the inventor of the galloping sawmill.

"How are you, stranger?" I said. "What kind of a machine might that be?"

"What does it look like?"

"A portable wire clothes-line," I said, "with a sawmill attached."

"It's a sawmill," said the inventor. "It goes around; that it, it's supposed to."

"I'm going across the forest to visit my grandson," I said. "Always go visiting about this time of year. No particular hurry, though. Wouldn't mind stopping to help you fix your machine. If you've got the tools, it oughtn't to take us more than a week."

"What do you know about machines?" the inventor asked skeptically.

"I can tell you right where this job gives you trouble," I said. "You take a tree with an extra long branch—it'll fall with a reach that'll hook over your wire and pull you off your course and wrap you up like a calf caught in its rope."

"You're doin' all right," said the inventor, "but how are you going to get around that trouble?"

I studied the machine for a good half minute, and said, "It's the angle of the saw. You've set it almost horizontal—tipped just enough so that the tree stump catches the weight of the cut tree—while it turns and falls."

"Right. How'd you know?" said the inventor.

"All you need is a shallower angle so the tree will be slower to fall. Let me figure a moment—er—yes, three-fiftieths of a degree will do it."

"Three-fiftieths," he grumbled. "That means I'd have to rebuild the whole floor."

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"So I stay and help you all week."

"Hired," said the inventor. "It's lunch time. Come on. I'll fix you up for room and board over at the temple."

CHAPTER XXV

Roast Ribs on Two

LUNCH was served and I was one of the star boarders. It was a weird experience, for, as Maud Slade had observed, these guards were big fellows with fierce eyes. They gorged themselves with food and drink, and the way they told stories and shouted and laughed reminded me of the days of Beowulf. These ironclad men were weaponed well—and mannered ill.

They put the pressure on me for all the lies I could muster about my life on the south side of the forest, and my son's affairs in the north; and where, they wanted to know, did I get my knowledge of machines, especially traveling saws?

I dodged them and stroked my gray beard constantly to be sure it was still on, and I kept a lively cackle in my voice. I fooled them. I almost fooled myself. But did I fool all those goldarned cats?

All the while I was wondering about the King. I hadn't seen hide or hair of him.

Von Darsk lumbered into the dining room with a side of roast ribs in his hand and grease on his cheeks. He took the big chair at the head of the table, growling and muttering to himself.

"Anything wrong?" the lieutenant asked.

"Damned radio reports," Von Darsk said. "They sound too good."

"Broko Blue is putting an extra twist on them," said the lieutenant.

"He's in too big a hurry to stir up the people," said Von Darsk. "He shouldn't crowd 'em."

The guards demonstrated their agreement. They were a well-trained gang of yes-men.

"But he's got to hurry up and stir them up or he'll miss his trick," said Von Darsk. "That American's still loose with all the plans. If he gets to the King before we do, he might puncture the whole balloon. Broko's got to hurry."

"Right." . . . "Yes." . . . "Exactly." . . .

"Just as I was telling the lieutenant." The gang went for the argument as if it were their own.

"But he'll have better luck," Von Darsk went on, "if he'll wait till we take this actor around through the villages and let him put on his scene from the play. That'll stir 'em up against the King faster. Broko's fake news reports are risky. But things will start humming if we take our time and get this actor on the job."

The guards were again unanimous. A fine spirit among these lads, it seemed. Complete loyalty.

"How many are out after that American? Only twenty men?" Von Darsk scowled deeply. "Well, if they don't bring him in by night, lieutenant, send out some more for the search. It was damned careless, bringing that American in here."

"The cane did it," the lieutenant protested. "And how could we know that fellow wasn't Broko Blue? If you'd only let us follow your cat messages, so we'd know Blue—"

Von Darsk swung a hand, loaded with a chunk of ribs. The blow caught the lieutenant across the kisser. The table joggled, and I sprang back from my place. I thought sure there'd be a free-for-all.

I was wrong. Von Darsk was the boss here. The lieutenant picked him-

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self up and rubbed the grease off his face and licked his fingers, commenting that the ribs were first rate.

The gang laughed, and dignity, temple-style, was restored. Then Von Darsk repeated that the American—meaning me, of course—had put it over on the guards and would have to be killed.

Everyone, including the lieutenant, heartily agreed.

"I'll have the sawmill ready for action before long," the inventor piped up.

"We won't wait to kill him fancy," said Von Darsk. "You had your chance. If you can't make machinery that will run itself, you can at least stay with it. Who's that you've got with you?"

Von Darsk looked at me.

"He's traveling through," said the inventor. "He comes this way every year. I've put him to work repairing my invention."

"*You've* put him to work," Von Darsk growled. "I'll put him to work myself."

THERE are times when a fellow wearing a false beard is sure it will fall off—especially if everybody's looking at him. I stroked my beard and found it was still with me, so I went on breathing.

"I've seen you before," said Von Darsk.

My beard quivered from my toes up. "I come through this part of the forest every fall, sir," I said.

"You're the one that helped me feed the cats five years ago, aren't you?"

"Six years ago, wasn't it?" said the lieutenant. "I remember that beard—yes, six years—"

Smack! The lieutenant got another face full of ribs, and this time they clattered to the floor, to be left there for the cats.

"It was five years ago," the lieutenant admitted, as docile as a kitten, and he thought everything was squared.

But Von Darsk was in good form, showing off for company. "I said *six* and I mean six!" He flung the flat of his big leathery hand at the lieutenant's jaw, and the latter found himself keeping company with the ribs and the cats.

I decided then that whatever Von Darsk said was right. O.K., I had helped him mix some special cat food on a previous visit. Sure, I would repeat the formula. Stay over for a few days? I'd be delighted.

"Now let's have some entertainment," said Von Darsk, coming up from a bottle. "Send in that actor. We need a song and dance to celebrate."

"What have we got to celebrate?" asked the lieutenant.

"Me," said Von Darsk. "I'll be the King some day. Is that news to you, stranger?"

This question was mine and I couldn't do anything less than agree. "It's very interesting news."

"Now, don't you go telling anyone, but in a few weeks I'll be King of Kadenza, and in a few more, Anatogga. That's right after this fellow Broko Blue builds himself for a humpty-dumpty right off the wall. You heard anything about it, stranger?"

"I've heard that the present King is gone."

"He's walked out on us," said Von Darsk, and I saw that the King was at the door hearing all this. "Why does a king walk off a throne? Shut up, I'll answer that. He walks off because he's guilty. Maybe he's committed treason against his country. Maybe he's done an unjust murder. Maybe he's kidnaped a princess from another kingdom and he knows he's about to be exposed."

"So you're going to take his place," I said, lifting my glass. "Long live the King!"

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THE drinking and cheering stimulated the ambitions of the big, leather-lunged boss. He took in more territory. He would be the King of two other countries as soon as he got to the top of Anatogga. In time his power would spread all over Europe.

"You want to know the secret of my power?" asked Von Darsk. He asked the question of me, then repeated it to the King standing in the doorway waiting to do his song and dance. "The secret is cats."

"Cats?" I said, as if I had never heard of such a thing.

"These cats bring me knowledge of people—what they want, how they feel about things, how they fight, whom they love." Von Darsk was growing eloquent. "Knowledge is power. It places all intrigues in my hands. Take this actor, for instance. Come here, actor."

The King advanced, and three dozen cats followed him.

"If this man has a special talent for turning people against King Lenzono, my cats feel his power and they come and tell me about him. And what do I do?"

"You hire me," said the King, as cool as a desperate villain.

"Right," said Von Darsk, smacking his fist on the table. "I hire you and you act. All right, hop up on the table and give us your speech."

"Pay in advance," said the King.

"Jump up and turn on the chin music. You're holdin' up the audience. Give us that argument for assassination that stirred up the capital in the movie."

"Pay in advance," said the King.

"Pay, pay? Is that all you can say? How much do you want?"

"One cat," said the King.

"Hell, we've got more cats than we know what to do with. Take your choice."

"I am an actor," said the King very calmly. "I want a cat that can act."

Von Darsk turned to his lieutenant with an order that started the guards whispering among themselves. "Get him a cat that can act."

"How can I?" said the lieutenant. "You put the last smart cat-actor to death day before yesterday—"

Smack! Smack! Plop!

Four guards carried the lieutenant over to a cot where he could sleep it off.

"We'll get some cats fixed up to act for you," said Von Darsk with a reassuring gesture for the King. "They can be made to behave for you with a little trouble. Some special secrets—we've got a gal here who knows some tricks for training them—tricks that have come down through the ages with this old temple. It goes fast if we can cook up the right food—which reminds me—"

Von Darsk was looking at me, and chills raced from my brain out to the point of my beard and into my soup.

"It'll be all right, Mr. Actor," said Von Darsk. "I've got the very man here to help me feed up some smart cats for you. O.K.? O.K. Now that song and dance . . . Listen good, boys. Here's how we stir up the country. When I get to be King you'll be proud to remember this day."

So the King mounted a table and went through his act, and it's mighty proud of him I was. Everybody listened spellbound, even the cats.

And the next thing I knew Von Darsk was ushering me into his private pantry to help him mix up my special brand of cat food.

CHAPTER XXVI

A Good Mixer?

"SEND Muriel around when we get this stuff mixed," Von Darsk or-

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dered. "We'll need her help."

"I'll tell the old ladies," said the guard who was substituting for the lieutenant.

Von Darsk watched me as I went to work rummaging through the shelves. There were fifty-seven hundred varieties of spices, powders, ointments and poisons, by a rough estimate. A very fine collection of labels, too, not one of which meant anything to me.

"Do you remember whether we mixed up a large batch or a small one the last time?" I asked.

"Large," said Von Darsk. "And a good thing, too. I never could remember just what our formula was."

"It isn't easy to remember," I said. "Are you sure I didn't write it down?"

"Hell, no," said Von Darsk, "we just whipped it up out of your head."

"My head, huh?"

"Here's some skull-tops you can use for mixing-bowls."

"It may take quite a while to get just the right consistency," I said, batting my eyes at one after another of the powders.

"Take your time," said Von Darsk. "That's the way we did before."

"Did we?"

"Don't you remember, we killed a few cats before we got what we wanted. Hell, I need a nap, fellow. You go right ahead and take the afternoon for it. I'll send in a few cats and leave you to your own mixing."

Von Darsk went out, and the quiet was disturbed only by the soft patter of paws at my feet and the clink of bottles and cans at my fingertips.

In case you ever go to this temple and try mixing a superb cat tonic, I can save you some futile experimentation. If you reach for the second shelf and pick out every fifteenth box or bottle from the left and mix a spoonful of each in a skull mixing-bowl, the skull instantly dissolves and a corner of the table melts away.

If you try every seventeenth item on the first shelf, put the first five items in one skull bowl and the next five in another and pour the two together, you wake up in the next room with your clothing in disarray and your false beard hanging on a cat, who otherwise had no hair whatsoever.

If you get yourself hitched up and rebearded and go back for another try, and confine your mixing to some of the weaker ingredients, such as strychnine, quinine, iodine and tar-o-pine, you get less spectacular results. The cats won't lap up the mixture like milk, but if you force-feed them you can note a vitalizing effect. They move out under their own power—the only trouble being that ten or fifteen paces down the line they begin scorching from an inner fire, there's a puff of smoke, and all you have left is an odd strip of charcoal crumbling on the floor.

I PRACTICALLY made a career of this experimenting during the next three or four days. Von Darsk was often annoyed because I wasn't getting results. But when I talked of taking a leave of absence for a course in chemistry, he dug up more mixing-bowls to replace the disintegrated ones and told me to stay with it. Len the actor must be paid for his remarkable work. He must have all the trainable cats his heart desired.

Muriel would often come in, when the guards were out and Von Darsk was snoring.

"When it comes to acting," she would say, "you're doing almost as well as the King."

"How am I doing when it comes to Muriel?"

"You mustn't talk that way, the cats might hear you."

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"I'm learning how to handle the cats," I said, forcing a dose of liquid fire down the throat of one of the beasts, who promptly rolled over and curled his toes up. "But are you sure, Muriel, that none of these cats have told them about the King and me?"

"If the skulls have caught anything," said Muriel, "the red smoke has drifted away without being caught. I've been keeping watch most of the time. None of these men suspect the King of being more than an actor."

"Is he still sowing seeds of revolt among the peasants?"

"He's doing his best, because they keep taking movies, and you know what that means to him. But things aren't going the way Von Darsk and Broko planned."

"What's wrong?"

"That villainous talk isn't winning the people over. It's making them angry."

"At the King?"

"At the actor and also at Broko Blue's fake newsreels that keep playing him up. You see, they've loved Lenzono the Jumpy too much to be taken in by the actor's plea for revolt. They can be momentarily shocked, but deep in their hearts they're not going to believe the King has run away because of any wrong he did."

MURIEL'S loveliness was something to behold, and I'll credit myself with some remarkable acting of my own for not letting her know how much I felt like making a few passes in her direction. The fact was, that beautiful and inspired light in her eyes was adoration and loyalty for King Lenzono.

"It's the darnedest thing I ever heard of," I said. "The King is so much loved by the people that when he goes out and ballyhoos for a revolt against himself the people get mad at him because they really love him so much."

"Do you know," said Muriel, "I think Lenzono knew what he was doing when he signed up to act for them."

"Betwen phrenology and cats and you," I said, "he knows everything. I wonder if he can tell me how to mix up a formula to make these felines intelligent."

"Just keep mixing," said Muriel, smiling with amusement.

"Is there a right combination out of all these shelves?"

"Your beard's on crooked," said Muriel. "Here, let me help you. Oh, by the way, you haven't asked me if I had any news from Doris Jastrow."

"How can I ask about Doris when I'm looking at you?"

"Don't you realize you're very much in love with Doris? You should see what I see in the mirrors."

"Where is she?"

"You'd really like to know?"

"I can guess," I said. "She's out riding with Mr. Holly."

"Mr. Holly has left. He finished revising his play and left yesterday at noon. By now he's in America."

"Are you telling me that Doris went with him?"

"Aha, I thought you'd be interested." Muriel gave a teasing laugh. "Keep mixing, Mr. Chemist. It's lots of fun to have you around. These guards are so dull. No sense of humor. Keep your beard out of the glue, grandpa."

She left me to my mixtures. I reached for the carbolic acid and gave the benefit of my evil humor to the first cat that walked in.

Late that night Muriel came to me in very different spirits.

"Speak, woman, or have the cats got your tongue?"

"The cats are going to tell everything, Eddie," she gasped. "I've just received word through the first one to

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arrive home. My mirror makes it very plain."

"Make it plain to me, can't you? This is serious!"

"It happened at a little village at the edge of the forest," said Muriel. "The people became so angry at the King's sample of the play that they almost mobbed him."

"And Von Darsk—was he there?"

"He and Broko Blue. They suddenly decided to doublecross their actor and make him out to be a traitor to the government. They'll take their case to the palace tomorrow. They'll make themselves heroes for getting to the bottom of this actor's revolt plot."

"*His* plot!" The irony of it, thinks I.

"But his acting is so good they're wondering if he's sincere. Now they're hurrying back here to catch the red smoke and see what his real loyalties are."

"They're closing in on us this time," I snapped. "They'll read every pedigree in the temple."

"And they're bringing him along," Muriel was trembling and her eyes were filling with tears.

"Hold it," I said. "We'll break up this party somehow. I haven't been dabbling in acids for nothing. Hurry. Gather up all the skulls. We're going to clean house."

"There won't be time, Eddie. They'll catch us and kill us."

"We'll take a chance. Roll 'em into my mixing room. Hurry!" I started grabbing bottles from the second shelf.

Wait a minute. Was this right—every ninth item from the left—or was it every eleventh?

"Here they come!" Muriel called.

"The men?"

"The skulls!" She bowled them in to me so fast I jumped like a pin-boy at an A. B. C. Tournament.

CHAPTER XXVII

"Chauffeau" for Broko

THIS is Doris Jastrow speaking.

I wonder what's become of Eddie.

I'm sure he didn't go back to America with Mr. Holly.

It was yesterday noon that Mr. Holly put the final touches to his play and took off for his home hemisphere. He invited me to go along, too, but I couldn't think of it. Things are much too exciting right here. I've got a feeling hellzabouttapop. If the King doesn't get back to his palace soon, his officials will treat him like an enemy alien.

But I'm still convinced that he's taking his life in his own hands when he does come. Broko Blue has planted too much political dynamite. It just goes to prove that any right guy, even a King, doesn't dare turn his back on his nest-eggs for a minute or he may come back to sit on a time-bomb.

Mr. Holly, the old dear, gave me a goodbye kiss when he left. Sort of. He placed it on the back of my hand. Anyway, it was a nice sentiment. And what he said was affectionate in a fatherly sort of way. Something like this:

"Doris, you're a good sport. Better get yourself out of this forest before the fireworks start. I've seen it coming from the day I arrived. The King's putting on a remarkable act—"

"You knew all the time he was the King?"

"I had a chance to watch him at work in the palace," Mr. Holly said, "and it's my habit when I see an interesting face to imagine what it would look like in all sorts of theatrical adornments. That wasn't all I learned at the palace. I kept my eye on Broko Blue and caught clues of a revolt in the making."

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"Then that's where your play started?"

"Exactly," Mr. Holly said. "Later when I discovered the old temple I did enough eavesdropping to gather an accurate picture. The architect of long ago who fashioned the tiers above the entrance must have been in league with spies. Those perches are perfect for listening in on temple secrets."

Mr. Holly's words amazed me. It seemed that the play he'd written had only served to promote Broko Blue's revolt.

"Not so," said Mr. Holly. "The people are on the King's side. I'll admit I was surprised when he showed up and agreed to take the villain's part. But do you know, I believe that little scamp knew what he was doing when he agreed to sign up for his enemies and tour his country. If only *they* don't discover he's the King incog!"

"That would be bad," I said.

"It would be fatal," said Mr. Holly.

"Why don't you stay and see him through?"

Mr. Holly laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Is it any of my business if he gets himself assassinated? I'm only a playwright."

"The danger is worse than you think, Mr. Holly," I said. "Do you know about the cats?"

The mystical curiosity in his eyes gleamed brightly. "I'm not sure, Doris. We'll talk about that if we ever meet again. Some things are much clearer if you look back upon them from a distance. Goodbye—and please take this sea-horse cane off my hands as a final favor. You don't mind? You're a good sport, Doris."

AFTER he had gone, Maud Slade and I got our heads together. We knew we didn't dare go to the temple. If Eddie and the King were there, it was up to them to take care of themselves.

We bade the woodsman and his wife farewell and drove the old battle-scarred taxi back to civilization, straight to the gates of the palace.

A one-armed doorkeeper with an orange-and-white uniform and courteous eyebrows wasn't sure whether we ought to come in. He kept looking up in a tree for a cat that wasn't there.

"We used to have cats for guards and they knew everything," he said, "but they've disappeared just like the King."

"Let us in," said Maud Slade. "After one hundred and forty-one steps I've got to have a drink of water."

"And we have business," I added. "I've come to return this cane to its owner."

The courteous eyebrows went up in great surprise. "Mr. Blue's sea-horse! Do come in!"

From then on we waited. The one-armed doorman was good enough to move us from one place to another every time we got restless, and by ten o'clock that night we must have waited in twenty or more beautiful rooms. It was an ideal way to see the palace. Our favorite doorman even brought us a supper. Maud Slade was so excited over the royal food set before her that she couldn't eat.

"I guess it's just as well he didn't love me," she sighed. "I never could stand to be a queen. Too much lah-de-dah for me."

From time to time we were informed that Broko Blue was in conference or out, or dining or off on a tour. We didn't get to see him until today—and if you've followed the radio news you know that things have happened fast today.

This march on the palace got under way at noon.

The first we knew of it, the friendly

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doorman woke us up (we'd spent the night on sofas in the reception room, being unwilling to take on the torture of climbing steps and crashing in a second time)—and brought us breakfast and a radio. His voice had alarm in it.

"I think Mr. Blue will be too busy to see you again today. People are massing in the public square."

The radio brought us some of the brief fiery soap-box orations. These citizens were determined to have some satisfaction out of the palace. At twelve-thirty they were massed some twenty thousand strong on the palace grounds and steps.

Mr. Blue mounted the balcony. And he talked fast. Whatever they wanted they would have. He'd see to it personally, because he was one hundred percent on their side.

"We want the King!" came the mighty war-cry.

Broko Blue waved them to silence and told them he would hold a conference with their representatives at once. The next thing you knew, nearly two hundred "representatives" of their mob, probably the ones with the best lungs who were the first to negotiate one hundred and forty-one steps, came shouting through the palace corridors.

"Which is the King's room?" they cried. "If he's hiding here, we want to see him."

BROKO BLUE actually didn't know, that was plain. He got in a few words edgewise as the crowd quieted. (Back in our safe corner one of the palace attendants murmured that Mr. Blue just wasn't his usual bold self, now that his cane was lost. That being the case, I decided to hold onto it and let this doublecrosser take whatever might come.)

"If he's here," said Broko Blue, with his back against the sanctum door, "what do you mean to do?"

"Tell him there's a revolt on foot," said the spokesman of this loyal band. "He's got to come out and put a stop to it. If necessary, we'll organize a citizens' army and go with him."

Broko Blue was in a tight spot. He took a long chance.

"I'm sure the King isn't here, but I'll lead you. I'll go to the scene of the revolt at once."

"Just to make sure," said the spokesman, "we'll take a look."

Broko Blue was wise to step aside, because these mobsters meant business. Most mobs are made of cowards, they say. But when you have a mob of patriots who know they're in the right, it takes more than Broko Blue's bravado to stop them.

They removed the door in one piece. They found a room stocked with provisions and decorated with pictures of educated cats—but no King, of course. The search extended through the palace, and the conclusion was quick and sure. The King was gone; he'd been gone all the time; and at this late date no one could hope to guess where he might be or whether he was dead or alive.

The momentary confusion gave Broko his chance. He made a quick, powerful speech. He couldn't have opened the room without disobeying orders. But now he could prosecute the search for Lenzono with a clear conscience. As for the rebels—

"I go at once to disperse them. I'll search out this actor who is said to be inflaming the people. I'll see him brought to trial tomorrow!"

Sixteen officers in orange-colored uniforms clicked their heels and responded to his salute, and that put him over.

"I go!" he shouted. "But I shall return!" And down the one hundred and forty-one steps he marched. The citi-

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zens' committee rushed ahead of him to break the path through the mob.

He made for a palace limousine, but who should be at the wheel but Yours Truly, Doris Jastrow, all starchy in an official chauffeur's uniform. At my side was my slightly nervous mechanic in an orange military cap and coat—and green shorts.

We drove like the wind.

We reached a village at the southwest corner of the forest by evening, arriving in the wake of another mob. Von Darsk and his guards were just hustling the King away from this place as we drove up.

Now we're following them back into the forest. Our destination must be the temple. Von Darsk and his men are in a Rolls, doubtless the one that Mr. Holly traded back to a village dealer when he left.

Maud is scared stiff, and I'm afraid to hit the bumps for fear of breaking her neck. But Broko Blue keeps barking orders from the rear seat.

"Step on it, girl. We're losing ground."

He growls that women drivers are bad luck, and he grumbles to himself because his lost cane never came back. (Maud has it hidden back of us.)

But most of his words have been directed into the two-way short-wave set, tuned in on the car ahead. Every time he barks the voice of Von Darsk comes roaring back. They've carried on a terrific quarrel, and they're both as mad as hops.

Once in a while Von Darsk has made his actor say something, but the King is doing a silent act most of the time.

"We've got to turn the tables fast," Broko is convinced. "The only way we can pull out now is to let your actor take the rap. Watch him there. Don't let him jump out. He might kill himself."

"We're safer bringing him in dead," Von Darsk insists.

"You're wrong. If the cats and skulls prove he's a rebel at heart, I'll take him back and give him a trial that will set me up for life."

"If the skull test proves he's really a rebel." Von Darsk is skeptical.

"We'll all testify against him," Broko keeps saying. "Muriel, too; I'll give her a chance to come through."

We're nearing the temple now. For a while I had hopes there were police on our trail. No sign of them now. Maybe they think a woman driver is bad luck too.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Red Smoke No Come

HELLO, world, this is Eddie Trent, resuming the blow-by-blow account of events in the subterranean collection of dungeons which someone has sarcastically called a temple.

In case you've lost count of how many skulls Muriel has bowled into my mixing pantry, the grand total amounts to several dozen sets. Perfect strikes, I might add, though the table-legs and my ankles make stubborn pins.

"Hey, if I melt all these skulls away with chemicals," I yelled, "What happens to us when the cats come in?"

"Go ahead and do away with the skulls. We'll handle the cats later," Muriel called, and she kept on jerking polished skulls down from the walls. She went out in the garden and got her own. She slipped into the old ladies' rooms and got theirs.

"Hey, tell me how these cats could get back ahead of Von Darsk's car. Are you sure he's coming?"

"He and Broko have stopped to give the King a quiz on the way, so the forest cats could bet an earful. The swiftest

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cat has already reported these things. The others are also taking short-cuts and they'll soon be home. Von Darsk expects all the answers to be oozing out of the skulls when he gets here.. So—do hurry!"

"I'm hurrying."

"But the skulls aren't melting!" Muriel cried.

"Wrong combination of chemicals," I said. "Too much corn syrup and oatmeal, I'm afraid."

I'd been filling one after another of the bony receptacles with the tar-like mud I'd whipped up in the big mixing tub. But nothing happened.

"We've got to do away with them!" Muriel said. "Throw them up through that little window. My garden is just outside, and there's a big hollow log. I'll run out and hide them."

It was my turn to bowl.

The unfilled skulls were handiest to the windows. I went into action like a trench mortar . . .

"Enough!" Muriel called. "The log's jammed full."

"Jammed full too damned quick," I cracked for my own benefit. Nearly half the tar-filled skulls were still stacked at my feet. The other half were piling up outside by the window.

No time for any more skull-hiding. Here came a whole blitz of cats, chasing down the incline, and I knew by their meows they were carrying a mean load of headaches.

I helped Muriel down through the window, we dashed from the pantry into Von Darsk's conference room—too late! The cats were already rushing into it looking for their skulls. We backed away and banged the screen doorway between ourselves and most of them.

A few had got through and they were after us. So I gave them one skull from the pantry.

It was a skull I had laid aside. I recognized it by the cord strung through it. It was *my* skull—the one I had taken from the museum.

The cats went for it. That gave us approximately ten seconds to catch our breath and get ready for more trouble.

It came—in the form of Von Darsk, Broko Blue, and their gang of guards. They ushered the King down through the temple passages into the conference room.

If you've ever been to a zoo, when two hundred monkeys are racing for the same goal at the same time, I trust you can imagine what happened the minute these men exposed their skulls to scores of headaching cats. For a moment I thought I'd see my own torture scene re-enacted.

MEN dashed for the nearest exits; a lady, too—Doris Jastrow! We signalled to her, and she joined us on the safe side of the screen door. The King was encumbered by a quartet of guards, tough ones, who wouldn't let him go, cats or no cats.

Presently Von Darsk got the situation in hand.

"Where are all the skulls?" Doris whispered to Muriel.

Simultaneously Von Darsk roared, "Where are all the skulls?"

His roar was at first directed at the guards and then at the old ladies a few rooms beyond. Nobody seemed to know the answer. He looked through the screen door at me. I shrugged, stroked my beard innocently and handed him the skull I had borrowed from the museum.

As it was the only one in sight, Von Darsk ordered it set in the center of the conference room floor, and all the cats he had not imprisoned went for it.

"We'll soon know how much treason is in our actor's blood," said Broko

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Blue, casting hateful glances at the King. Everyone waited, wondering what revelations this single skull was receiving.

Meanwhile Muriel whispered an introduction of me in my long beard to Doris, who suppressed a shriek of surprise. "Grandpappy Trent!" she whispered. "Wait till the cats tell on you. We'll all be sunk."

She gave a brief hint of adventure at the palace. Maud Slade, she said, had dropped out on the return trip through the forest.

"The last I saw of her she was doing a hundred-yard dash," said Doris, "to tell the woodsman and his wife the King's a goner . . . So you two have been together all this time?"

"Eddie is a very good mixer," Muriel whispered.

Doris gave me a suspicious eye. She wanted to pull my false beard off, but I caught her hands and held them.

Now Von Darsk thought the skull should be ready to make a report. He called for mirrors, and he and Broko Blue got down on the floor beside my museum piece to look for red smoke.

"If you'd turn the lights off," said Broko, "we'd be able to see the smoke."

The guards kept a close watch over the King, who was still acting his hayseed-turned-villain, though you could see in his glances that he wished he were on our side of the screen door. Muriel was looking at him longingly, as if she'd give anything to be able to talk with him.

The lights were turned down—lower—still lower.

"There's no red smoke," Von Darsk growled. "If there was any I could see it in the light."

Broko Blue scowled at the skull. Then his eyes flicked up at me. I backed away from the doorway.

"What goes on here?" Broko exploded. "Who is that bearded gent and what does he know about this business?"

Von Darsk turned and eyed me sullenly. "Skulls all gone! Cats loaded and no skulls! Hours and hours of mixing formula and nothing to show for it. And now—now the red smoke doesn't come. *Who are you and what have you done?"*

Von Darsk was moving toward me like a black tornado.

"You're not the person I thought you were. I've got your number—and you and that chauffeur girl with you—you're the Americans."

"I've been mixing—" I began haltingly.

"The man who mixed for me before died the last time he came this way," said Von Darsk. "My lieutenant tried to refresh my memory on that, but I wasn't in the mood to listen. Now I know it's true."

The sharp stinging of my chin was from having my beard yanked off. The sharp pangs in my scalp were from being grabbed by the hair and flung into the corner. The stifled scream was Doris Jastrow's. With the nerve of a tigress she stepped into Von Darsk's path.

I jumped to my feet and came out of my corner with fists doubled.

In that split second it was the King's snappy speech that froze our action.

"That skull won't give you any smoke."

"Why not?" Von Darsk and Broko Blue both yelped at once.

"Because it takes a human skull," said the King. "That's not human. *It's a chimpanzee skull."*

"How do you know?" Von Darsk snarled.

"Any phrenologist could tell you," the King said, confidently.

"Phrenologist?" Broko Blue's eyes

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narrowed. "Phrenologist? That sounds like His Majesty—say, who are you?"

"Run!" Muriel cried. "Run for your life!"

CHAPTER XXIX

Rock-a-bye Temple

I DON'T think the King meant to run. His chances were too slim. Muriel's outcry following Broko Blue's sudden inspiration, however, gave the guards their cue to pounce upon their victim like four overgrown cats.

They hurled him back into a corner and succeeded in jerking the shirt off his shoulders.

Whereupon it was revealed that he carried tattoos of the royal coat-of-arms and the words, "Lenzono, King of Kadenza."

Von Darsk gave a low whistle that made the imprisoned cats jump at their bars.

"Let the cats have him!" Broko Blue shouted. "It's our necks or his!"

"I told you we'd better take him dead than alive."

"Wait, guards!" Broko Blue yelled. "It's up to me. The public has got to have this straight. It's a laugh for you, but I'll see that they swallow it. I'm rescuing Muriel from her kidnapper the King. He's the scound—"

He didn't get to finish the word. The King jerked an arm free and lashed out. Broko Blue staggered and made the mistake of stepping on the chimp skull, and his feet went out from under him. He got up mad, and the loudest voice laughing at him was that of Von Darsk. So his impetuous haymaker caught Von Darsk on his great sagging jaw with such force that Broko knocked himself down again.

The free-for-all was on. The guards swung out with their fists. If the King hadn't been short and wiry, he'd have taken a terrible beating. His art of ducking when two men swung from opposite directions soon accounted for six men strewn over the floor.

The lieutenant must have seen his chance to square some old grudges with Von Darsk. The criss-crossing of punches might have been followed by a cross-eyed sports announcer, but I wasn't up to it. I remember seeing the King crawl between Von Darsk's knees, and dodge in time to let someone bang Broko over the head with a chair.

But I was busy in my own little way once more. It was bowling-time in the temple recreation room.

Doris tossed a loaded bowling ball to me from the pantry.

"That's the heaviest skull I ever lifted," she gasped.

"Corn syrup," I said, and I heaved the bony missile straight at the shaggiest, orneriest-looking face in the lot of fighters—Von Darsk's.

The skull missed him by a fraction of an inch and smacked the wall—

Crack—BOOM!

"Dynamite!" Doris gasped. The explosion knocked her into my arms.

"Corn syrup and oatmeal," I said. "Throw me another."

"Where's Lenzono?" Muriel cried.

The yellow smoke was as thick as custard, and the heads of guards bobbed out of it wondering what had happened. I was wondering too—especially about the King.

Here came Broko Blue out of the dusk with murder in his eye. I hurled another skull and it bounced off his left ear. Broko went down. The loaded skull went sideways and caught on a dangling wire. It swung like a pendulum. Blue looked up at it.

Wasn't it going to explode?

EVERYBODY in that mess of smoke stopped fighting and began back-

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ing away from it. Broko stopped, considered, crept toward it with a cat-like caution.

Three or four guards meant to beat him to it. Suddenly they raced for it—twenty feet—fifteen—twelve—

BOOOMMM!

They fell back and tumbled over each other like a barrel of monkeys.

Zzzzzip! Smash! Another missile, and it didn't go off. Zzzzip! Smash! BOOM! BOOM! Another, and they both went off.

"How do you time those bombs?" Muriel asked.

"Eddie's a natural timer," Doris threw me another skull and an accusing look, "and a pretty fair two-timer."

We hurled another half dozen skulls or so apiece. Sometimes they exploded when they hit. Sometimes one would act like a dud until someone came along to get knocked out of his shoes. The last bony bomb rocked a wall and set a hundred cats free.

We raced through the pantry, the four of us. Our ammunition was gone—it was time to get out.

We boosted the King through the tiny pantry window first. Then the girls made a stepladder of me to follow him—each one of them took off from my left ear—and the King helped them up.

"Where's the taxi, Doris?" I yelled. She and the others ran for it. I was still in the pantry.

The window was almost too small for me. Von Darsk was coming after me with an unexploded skull. I dropped back to the pantry floor just as he let it fly. Then the window was larger.

I was out ahead of him by an arm's length.

Gray dawn—doubtless a peaceful morning if one could pick a suitable viewpoint. My particular bit of landscape was passing under foot. I succeeded in jumping over the big hollow log where Muriel had hidden all the empties. Von Darsk bogged down at that point. He was too bulky for such violent exercise.

After him came a hundred or so cats, and they sat down on the log beside him. He snarled at them, expecting trouble, and was pleasantly surprised to see them settle down alongside so peacefully.

I paused for a breath of regret. I had overlooked a small stack of loaded skulls near the log above the pantry window. The cats didn't overlook them, and neither did Von Darsk. He jumped up and began hurling them at me.

I climbed the temple wall like a human fly. If he was bent on blowing me up I'd just walk up and save him the trouble. He and his bombs stayed with me, and he wasn't bad for a southpaw. He'd probably pitched cats in his day.

Now he had me. There wasn't any handhold for that next tier. I was t r a p p e d. H e r e came a s k u l l—BLOOMBB!

"Thanks, old man! You carved a perfect step," I yelled, dodging the flying stones.

Now I was winning again. I was at the limit of his pitching range, and I caught whatever he threw and tossed it into the cat entrance high in the facade.

"Bowl 'em up, Von! You too, Broko!"

THEY fired skulls at me. I relayed their bony bombs gently to the mouth of the tunnelled incline, and you could hear the echo as the things went rolling down for a final deep-toned explosion somewhere in the depths. *Boom! Bloomp! Blanng!"*

Out came smoke and guards and cats

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and sections of temple wall and cats. And cats.

I moved up to what seemed a safe position on the pinnacle of the temple. Crackety - rippety - blonnng! I moved back from where the pinnacle of the temple had just been, to the terra firma of the steep hill. There I sat and laughed. Something I saw down the way amused me.

It was the battered old taxi plunging through the bushes into the garden. Doris was driving, swinging a swift circle past Broko Blue—and what did Broko Blue do but throw up his hands as if she was going to shoot him.

Why? Because she was pointing the sea-horse cane at him.

"Don't shoot!" Broko cried. "It's loaded!"

"So it's a gun!" Doris gasped.

That must have made the King mad, because he had a law against firearms in Kadenza. Yes, he was very angry, all right. He jumped out of the car and walked up to Broko.

"I accept your resignation," said the King. The official pronouncement called for a dramatic gesture or two, and so he added a left to the solar plexus and a right uppercut to the jaw—and Broko Blue accepted.

"To you, Miss Jastrow," the King added with a bow, "a silver souvenir."

Then the King, evidently seeing other official business that needed his attention, left the prone figure of Broko to Doris and Muriel, who then went to work with ropes. The King was last seen swinging himself nimbly over the garden fence. From my vantage point Von Darsk had disappeared.

But those girls had better take a taxi. The guards were coming round the path as mad as hornets.

But what was this I saw?

The thinning gray of dawn revealed a disturbing sight in the woods a short distance from the temple. Approximately five hundred men were gathering for an attack from a thicket. Several guards who had started off in that direction to escape the yellow smoke clouds suddenly paused to consider.

The citizens' army—for such it was—had been lost for a point of attack until now. But the demeanor of the guards was cue enough for them. They came forward with a grand rush. Weapons? Everything but firearms: spears, clubs, bows-and-arrows, mule whips and slingshots, and even homelier weapons known to be effective in domestic situations—rolling pins and stove-pokers.

THE free-for-all in the temple basement had been good and lively; but there's something healthier about an outdoor fight. Sunshine, fresh air, plenty of room, a chance to shout in full voice. The citizens' army found these things to their liking, and the guards did their share of the shouting in full voice.

"Holler 'nuff! Holler 'nuff!"

This shrill cry came from a long-legged apparition in an orange military coat and cap, with green shorts. Maud Slade—of all people! She was waving at our friend, the woodsman, telling him who was who and what to do.

The woodsman had this citizens' mob safely in hand, I'm glad to say, so that there was no danger that any of them would slug their good and true King by mistake.

But there was no danger anyway. The King was taking care of himself, not to mention one of his enemies six times his size.

You should have seen that. Mr. Holly should have seen it. Movie-goers who like a good action scene should have had an old-fashioned two-reeler out of it. The King was riding the

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galloping sawmill hot on the heels of Von Darsk.

Take your compass, draw fifteen circles at random, connect them with curlycues and you've got it. That's a map of the way they went. The spinning twelve-foot buzz-saw ate the trees down like a scythe cutting grass. Every time Von Darsk looked back the saw was slicing straight at him, singing merrily.

"Yape!" Von Darsk would yell, by way of adding a little guttural bass. "Yape!"

And then he'd run again, obviously inspired by a deeply rooted respect for steel teeth.

At last he fell, and the big saw sliced right over the top of him.

He was up again, minus a three-foot slice of clothing which had been neatly sheared from his posterior. He was running for the tall timber—and for good reason. He'd lost his belt. He was losing his trousers. His dignity was completely gone.

It was good-hearted of the King not to further embarrass him by continuing to pursue. The sawmill galloped back merrily, and the King, beaming with triumph, met his friends and loyal subjects, who were applauding him from the temple steps.

A one-armed doorman from the palace arrived in an official car, then—evidently a friend of Doris and Maud Slade. He took their word for it that this perspiring little man without mustaches was indeed the King.

"A radiogram for you, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Clifford," said the King, smiling. "Ah, it's from Mr. Holly in America."

Five hundred or so of us gathered around to help him read it.

"Ah, Kadenza forest!" the King shouted. "You are to be the scene of a Hollywood movie. The cameramen are on their way. And I'm to be the hero!"

Maud Slade read over his shoulder. "And you're to pick a leading lady, Len—er—Your Majesty!"

"Can I pick one!"

He came over my way and I tried to hide Doris and Muriel behind me.

"There she is," said Maud Slade.

"There she is," said the King, and he offered his arm to Princess Muriel. Then amid cheers that made the forest ring, they rode off in the taxi.

I turned to Doris Jastrow.

"You and I are going to have a long walk back to civilization," I said. "Of course we can talk over the stories we've got to write—"

"And we can pick thistles," said Doris, giving me a very curious smile.

Thistles? What was the gag? Oh, yes, that time I offered orange-blossoms—and she said she'd wear thistles before she'd marry me. O.K., this made it unanimous.

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Vignettes OF FAMOUS SCIENTISTS

By ALEXANDER BLADE

Robert Brown

He was the most noted botanist of the 18th century; first to discover the cell formation of plant life

ROBERT BROWN, British botanist, was born on December 21, 1773, at Montrose, Scotland, and was educated at the grammar school of his native town, where he had as contemporaries Joseph Hume and James Mill. In 1787 he entered Marischal College, Aberdeen, but two years later changed to Edinburgh university where he took a supplementary course in medicine. He became attached to a Scottish regiment that was stationed in Ireland as assistant surgeon. He remained with them for five years, devoting all his spare time to the study of the flora of that island, which is largely composed of grasses, sedges, rushes and fern, but very diversified within those limits.

In 1800 he resigned his commission, and accepted the position of naturalist on an expedition, under Capt. Matthew Flinders, to investigate the botanical conditions of the coasts of the Australian continent. When he returned he brought a collection of nearly 4,000 specimens of plants, of which more than half were entirely new to science.

Shortly thereafter he was appointed librarian of the Linnaen Society in London, and settled down to the occupation of writing botanical monographs which were published in its "Transactions," and of geological essays for the Wernerian Society at Edinburgh, of which he was a member. But the influence and classification systems of both these worthy men were, at the time, fast undergoing eclipse under the newer and more scientific systems of De Jussieu and Lyell, and Brown himself was among the first to abandon the old masters and enroll under the new ones. His writings contributed very largely to their general acceptance in Great Britain.

In 1810 Brown became librarian to Sir Joseph Banks, who on his death in 1820 bequeathed to him the use and enjoyment of his library and collections for life. In 1827 an arrangement was made by which these were transferred to the British Museum, with Brown's consent and in accordance with Sir Joseph's will. Brown then became keeper of this new botanical department, an office which he held until his death on June 10, 1858, in Soho square, London. In 1834 Brown was awarded the degree of D.C.L. by Oxford, and in 1839 the Copley medal of the Royal Society.

Although fully entitled to rank as a collecting botanist of high ability, Brown's fame will rest mainly on the fact that he was the first to recognize, and to announce in 1831, that the cell nucleus was the life unit of the vegetable world, just as already it had been shown to bear that relation to animal structure and tissue. His discovery was quickly followed up and extended by the botanist Schleiden, and the zoologist Schwann; with the effect of making it clear that all forms of organic life, from the lowest to the highest, are built up on one and the same system, in which the cell, with its centrally placed nucleus of protoplasm, surrounded by the cytoplasm, is the unit. It is of microscopic size, and essentially the same in plants and animals, including man. The substance called plasm, which exists in both the nucleus and cytoplasm, is continually in motion so long as life exists.

Protoplasm is mainly composed of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen, the other ingredients usually present in minor quantities being sulphur, phosphorus, potassium, and sometimes a few other of the elements. But almost nothing can be learned of the nature of this substance by making a chemical analysis of it, for the instant that process begins its death occurs.

It is the belief of physiologists that the evidence it gives of life in its motion is a molecular phenomenon, and must be studied mechanically as such. During recent years a very extensive literature has grown up on organic cells, which is absorbingly interesting to students of vital phenomena; but it cannot be claimed that as yet our knowledge of the nature of protoplasm is much more than of a preliminary kind.

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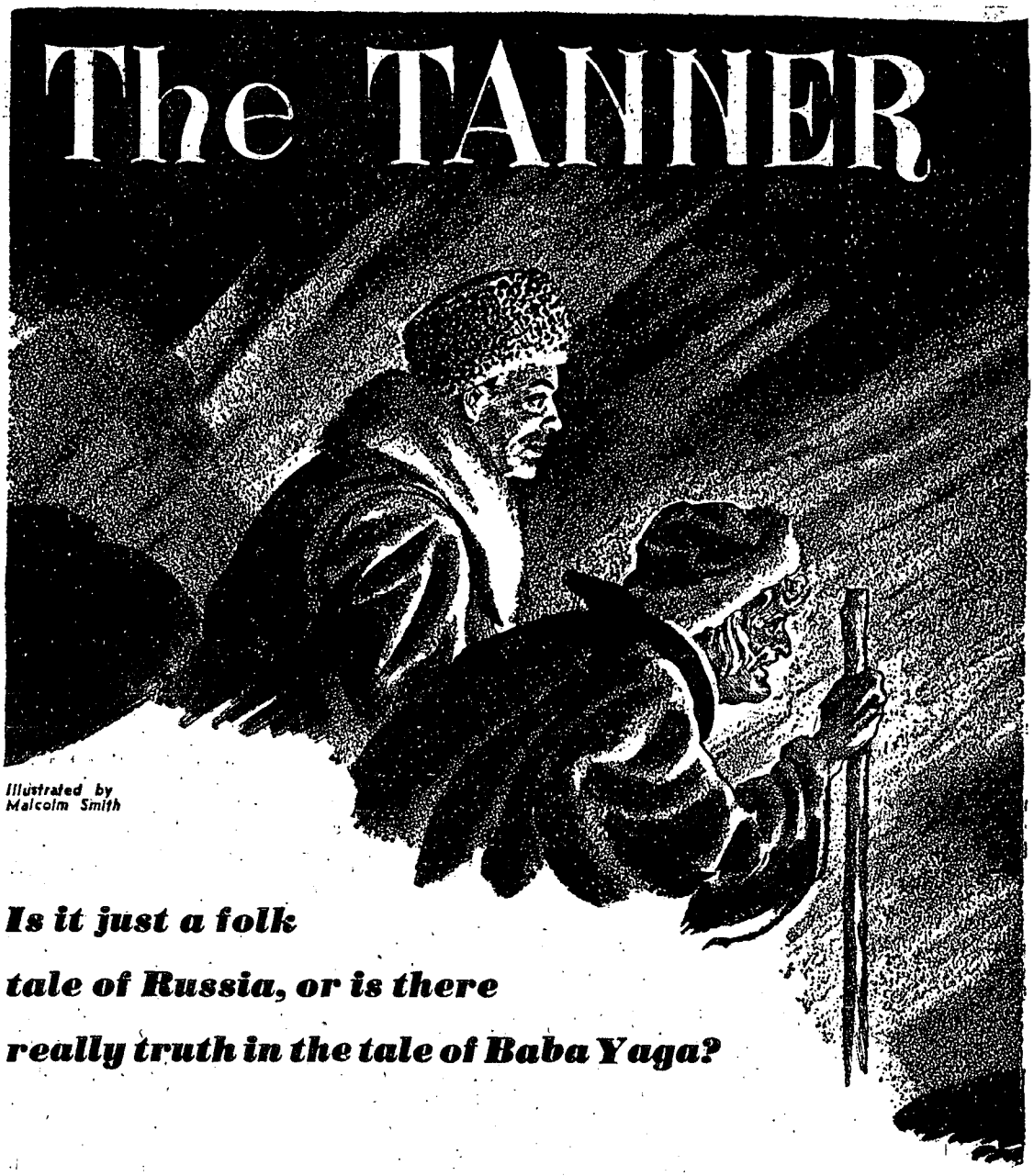
The TANNER



Illustrated by Malcolm Smith

Is it just a folk tale of Russia, or is there really truth in the tale of Baba Yaga?

. . . And a gnarled oak grows on the shore, and a learned cat that is chained with a chain of gold walks forward and back. And he sings as he goes to the right, and as he goes to the left he tells strange tales of enchantment. And a little hut upon chicken's legs turns round and round and the hut is blind, having neither casement nor door. And here the mortar of Baba Yaga wanders whither it will, and yonder Kostchei, the deathless, gloats above his shining hoards of gold . . . I have been there, and underneath the oak quaffed golden mead. And so I tell them to you. . . .

Russian folk tale.

* * *

"GOTOV, TOMMY?" yelled the pilot. He waved toward a ribbon of oiled silk which

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# of KIEV

By WALLACE WEST

There sat Kostchei and his learned cat

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gleamed ever so faintly in the starshine below.

"Da," Tommy Berennikov shouted back. He squirmed out of the shelter of the cockpit into the roaring wind. With one foot on an ice-coated wing he adjusted the heavy pack so that it would not foul his parachute. Then he lifted a gloved hand in farewell and allowed his body to enter the slip-stream.

The jerk as the gale snatched him, the spinning fall into blackness, affected Tommy as it always did . . . providing an upsurge of emotion like . . . like the first time he kissed a girl.

He counted slowly, for he enjoyed this uncanny sensation of falling free like a hawk upon its prey. There was plenty of time. They had been flying high to avoid German flak.

"Adeen." It was a tough assignment, this one . . . dropping behind the enemy lines on a moonless night . . .

"Dva." Especially with this cursed radio transmitter strapped to his back. If he missed his footing when he landed he'd be mashed as flat as one of Aunt Sonia's potato pancakes . . .

"Tre." Why couldn't those guerrillas hang onto their stuff?

Always yelling for more equipment . . . more machine guns . . . more rifles . . . more grenades . . . though they knew the regular army was short of them.

"Chetirie." Still and all, the partisans of Kiev were causing the Germans plenty of headaches. What had their last message said? "Four more munition trains blown up!" That had come by courier . . . a seventy-year-old peasant who had wormed his way a hundred miles through enemy lines, forests and swamps. And he had carried under his trembling arm a briefcase jammed with documents captured from a general. Not bad . . . except that he had also asked for a portable transmitter.

"Pyat." Morozko, it's cold up here. Forty below zero, at the very least. Colder than the night he had bailed out near Seville, blown up a bridge and caused a train wreck which killed eight of Generalissimo Franco's pet officials. That was why he had received this assignment. "Eight-at-one-blow-Berennikov." That's what they called him back at headquarters.

"Shest." Better start pulling that rip-cord, Tommy m'boy.

"Sem." Pull that rip-cord, you conceited fool. You'll need plenty of time to get your bearings. Or do you want to land in a tree-top and dangle there till some Heinie shoots you down?

All right. All RIGHT!

He hooked a half-frozen finger through the ring on his left breast pocket and yanked. The chute billowed out above him . . . stopped his meteoric descent with a spine-shattering jerk. The roaring wind trailed off with a wail like a Mushickek. He drifted silently as a ghost in that immensity of blackness. Must be about a thousand feet up. Now to keep watch until the shadow of a tree against the sky warned him that the earth was just beneath. If there were no tree . . . ? But there always had been one! He held his breath and swiveled his head back and forth without result.

Something leaped upward and struck his feet a blow which made even his teeth ache. He flung himself forward instinctively, at the same time snatching at the shrouds above his head in an effort to spill the air from the chute.

WHETHER it took a long time or a short time, Tommy never knew, but he recovered consciousness eventually and fell to caressing an egg-like bump on his forehead. His mind was hazy and the frozen ground insisted on dancing a jig under him when he finally

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managed to stand. Moving like an automaton he searched about until he found a place under the roots of a fallen tree where he could hide the telltale red silk of his parachute. Next he unlooped the transmitter from bruised shoulders, slumped down upon it and debated whether he dared light a cigarette. If . . . Finally he shrugged and fumbled for matches. A man was entitled to some consideration after taking a pounding like that. He cupped the tiny flame in his hands and puffed deeply.

"Don't be an oaf, Tommy!" whispered a piping voice at his very elbow. "Germans are thick as flies on honey not half a *verst* from here."

"Who're you?" gulped the parachutist, grinding out the spark. "And how do you know my name?"

"Heh, heh, heh," giggled the other. "Who hasn't heard of Eight-at-one-blow-Berennikov? As for me, my name is Kostchei. You know me well."

Tommy's dazed mind grappled with that. It reminded him of his grandmother as she hobbled about her hut in that little Ukranian village long ago. Kostchei! His scalp tingled as though the hair he had so carefully shaved from it that morning were trying to stand on end. "Sorry, comrade," he gave it up at last. "Your name means nothing to me."

"No. Perhaps not." The voice held a world of sadness. "They don't teach Russians the ancient things any more. You learn all about tractors and combines and airplanes. But you're not told how to worm secrets out of the Devil or the language of the birds and the beasts. Pfui!" He spat.

"Those things are bourgeoise superstitions," Tommy argued warmly. "We've built a new world. There are no more Tsars, no more dirt, no more misery, no more Bogatirs."

"So you think," piped his invisible acquaintance. "So perhaps it was . . . before the war. Why I've been practically in limbo these twenty years. But not now . . . not around Kiev at any rate. Here the dark old days have crept back over the land like a winter. Kiev even has a tsar again, although he's called by a foreign name . . . Gauleiter, I think it is. Pestilence stalks. The little dogs are all eaten. And the cats hide deep in the woods to escape a similar fate. No birds sing. And were it not that the Red Army still fights on, all the people would welcome death as their best friend."

"That bad?"

"Aye! And worse. For Gauleiter Schwartz has decreed that every month five hundred of the daughters of Kiev shall be sent to forced labor in Germany. Why the daughters? Because the men of Kiev have long since joined the army or the guerrillas or been killed. As for the girls, their fate makes even me . . . even Kostchei the Deathless . . . long to die at the shame of it."

"Kostchei the Deathless!" Tommy felt his scalp crawl again. He remembered now the *skazki,* or folk tales, which his wrinkled, bright-eyed granny had told him of that Ukranian warlock. But this was all nonsense. His neighbor must be some old man whose mind had been turned by misery. Or was it his own mind that was turned? He shook his head angrily, then desisted when it seemed he felt his brains rattle.

"If you are *that* Kostchei," he said at last, "you can direct me to guerrilla headquarters, can't you?"

"That I can. Ah, the sweet guerrillas. The dear little guerrillas. It makes my old heart glad to watch them stalk the Nazis and slit their throats." Kostchei's laughter shrilled into the rising wind. "True sons of Russia are they. And many is the gold ruble out

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of my horde that I have given them. And many an enemy have they left where the black iron-beaked crows could pick his bones."

"How do I find them, then?"

"Just follow your nose down the bank of the Dneiper. Jurka, my dog, will walk at your right hand. And Vaska, my cat, at your left. They will take you to the hut of Baba Yaga. Tell her, when you see her, that the clans are gathering. There are four of us here out of the old time, now. We cannot fail. Tell her that and she will direct you on the rest of your journey."

"Thanks, *Dyadya* Kostchei."

There was no answer. Tommy was alone on the frozen field.

SLOWLY he slipped the loops of the pack transmitter over his shoulders. That bump when he landed must have been a honey to make him have childish visions like that. Now he was right back where he started from. Follow his nose? When he couldn't even see the end of it in this blackness! He stepped gingerly forward. A moment later his feet found a path which led straight before them. Once he swerved to the right . . . and shivered as he thought he heard a low growl warn him. A long time later he stumbled into a tree. As he groped, some furry creature brushed against his boots. It almost tripped him, but set him back on his way.

Dawn was breaking by the time the wanderer reached his destination. It was a thatched hut set on a wooded knoll overlooking the broad Dneiper. The hovel had but one claim to distinction. Instead of a normal foundation, it stood on two legs which looked strangely like those of some gigantic chicken. These legs moved rhythmically, so that the house turned slowly round and round until one got dizzy just looking at it.

His weird experiences had served to remind Tommy of many of the tales told by his grandmother. So now he did the correct thing by chanting: "Stand with thy back to the forest, hut; thy face to me!"

The house became stationary at once. And just inside the open door sat a squirrel solemnly cracking nuts while it sang, in shrill falsetto, a song of old Russia. Instead of eating the kernels, the little animal was piling them carefully on a plate.

"Hello," said the squirrel in a thick Ukranian accent. "Looking for Baba Yaga? She's out in back repairing her mortar. Had a brush with the ack-ack last night." And it resumed cracking the nuts and paid no further attention to him.

In the wood lot Tommy found the witch. Her nose reached her chin. And her dirty gray hair hung down over her eyes in a straggly fringe as she bent over her mortar. It looked much like a mammoth edition of the utensil used by druggists in mixing their prescriptions, except that it was neatly camouflaged with black and white stripes. The Baba's wrinkled lips were uttering blasphemies as she labored with trowel and plaster to patch a ragged hole in the contraption.

"Good morning to you, Baba Yaga," said Tommy politely. (A witch is not to be addressed lightly, his granny had told him.)

"I smell a Russian smell," she muttered. Then she straightened up painfully, brushed the hair away from her piercing black eyes and grinned at him toothlessly. "Welcome, Tommy Berennikov," she said after taking a long look. "What brings you back and what have you been up to this time? I hope it was something better than killing eight flies at one blow and then brag-

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ging about it until you convinced people you were a hero."

"It was eight fascist generals I killed." Tommy flushed.

"Generals, is it now? Well, fascists are no better than flies, except they're a lot harder to get rid of."

"How did *that* happen? Her visitor changed a painful subject by nodding toward the mortar.

"I WAS flying over Kiev, scattering leaflets for the guerrillas, when the Huns nailed me with a searchlight. I swept the first beam away with my broom, of course, but just then they tagged me with three more." She struck the defenseless mortar a vicious blow with her trowel.

"Then what happened?"

"I tried to climb, but this son of a *kulak* has a speed of only fifty *versts* an hour and a ceiling not much higher than the roof of my hut. Flak started crumping all around. As you see, one of the shells almost finished me before I could get out of range."

"Maybe you should buy a new model."

"I've put in an order for one, but you know how things are these days. Everything's disorganized. Say!" She hopped up on the rim of the mortar with the agility of a girl and sat there swinging her dirty bare feet. "Maybe you could get Moscow to send me a Stormovik, or one of those American Liberators the radio keeps talking about. If I could fly either of them over Kiev I'd make things pretty hot for Gauleiter Schwartz and his mob. It wouldn't be leaflets I'd drop then."

"Ummm!" Tommy was noncommittal. Then: "Look, Baba Yaga. I'm starved. And I must get this transmitter to guerrilla headquarters. Can you help me? Kostchei said you could. And, oh yes, he said to tell you the clans were gathering and we can't fail."

"Kostchei's an old fool, but I hope he's right this time. As for food, you can have the nuts that Serge's been cracking. That's all we have left to eat hereabouts these days. The Germans have taken everything else. Come on to the house. This repair job can wait. Maybe I can remember a spell that will fix it without having to break my poor old back." She hopped off her perch, led the way to the hut, scooped up the plateful of nuts despite the squirrel's angry chatter, and slapped them on the table before Tommy. After which she flung herself down on the dirt floor and thrust her feet almost into the fire which was blazing in the chimney. In a moment she was snoring.

"Hey," cried Tommy, after he had finished his frugal meal. "How about taking me to the guerrillas?"

One rheumy eye opened at him momentarily. "Serge will take you," muttered the witch and promptly snored louder than ever.

Picking up the radio, which seemed to grow heavier each time he lifted it, the soldier stepped out of the door. Immediately the hut began revolving on its ungainly legs and all trace of an entrance disappeared in the dizzy whirl.

The squirrel scampered ahead, scolding the slowness of the human as it swung from tree to tree. Soon they left the forest and entered the suburbs of Kiev. Tommy was horrified at the devastation which rose about them. The city was one of the few which had been evacuated so rapidly by the Red Army that there had been no time to destroy it according to the scorched earth policy. However, the Germans had looted the place thoroughly. Hardly a window was intact. Many dwellings had been burned or dynamited as a lesson to the inhabitants. And no efforts had been made to keep the streets in repair, col-

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lect the garbage or operate the public utilities. It was a haggard ghost of a city out of a nightmare. Ragged citizens wandered through the littered streets. But they seemed in a daze and paid no attention to the stranger and his tiny companion.

Once they ducked into a shell-hole to avoid a goose-stepping enemy patrol. And later a crazed woman, clutching a dead child to her bosom, begged them for milk. Finally they reached a point where a huge sewer poured its filth into the river.

"In there with you, Tommy Berennikov," squeaked the squirrel. "If the rats don't eat you, you'll find guerrilla headquarters at the other end." And, with a disdainful flirt of his tail, the little fellow departed.

The parachutist plunged into the slimy hole. For a time he was able to walk upright. But the sewer branched and thereafter he had to crawl on hands and knees, fighting off hordes of huge rats the while. After an interminable struggle he struck his bruised head on some sharp obstruction. And once more consciousness departed in a blaze of light.

TOMMY came to his senses in a dim cavern which looked like the crypt of some ancient church. By the light of a candle, a slim red-haired girl was bandaging his head.

"Lucky we found you in time," smiled the nurse as his eyes opened. "Those rats would have had you in another five minutes."

"Better they than the two-legged ones up above," he grinned back weakly. "You found the transmitter all right, did you?"

"Yes. The commander will be here in a moment to thank you."

Tommy struggled into a sitting position, to get a better look at her. Nice! he said to himself. Then a door opened and a huge guerrilla, almost as broad as he was tall, entered the room.

"Welcome, Comrade Berennikov," beamed the newcomer through his black spade beard. "I am Commander Kyrilo, at your service."

"Kyrilo?" Tommy seemed dazed. "Not Kyrilo the tanner?"

"I used to be a tanner. Why?" The big fellow looked at him with something akin to anger on his broad, honest face.

"Then I wasn't out of my head," babbled Tommy. "You're the man who harnessed a dragon and ploughed a furrow all the way to the Baltic Sea. And you and Kostchei and Baba Yaga have come back and are working for the freedom of Russia. My name's Thomas Berennikov, so it looks as though I fit into the picture, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," snapped Kyrilo. "Or rather, it seems to me, Comrade Berennikov, that you're laboring under a bourgeois superstition. Some of the poor citizens of Kiev have been telling you stories that you'd best forget. This is no time to put your faith in *skazki* and magic help from some kingdom of thrice-ten. There's a war going on."

"Yes, sir," muttered Tommy, properly put in his place. He leaned back and let the red-haired nurse finish adjusting the bandage. He noticed there was a smile of secret enjoyment on her snub-nosed face.

The parachutist found, during the next few days, that there *was* a war going on in Kiev; one much different from anything he had experienced during his two years at the front. Here there were no mass attacks across the snow; no daring air raids behind the enemy lines; no pulverizing barrages from Russia's magnificent artillery. This fight was carried on in darkness. It was bloody,

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cruel and conducted under breathtaking handicaps. A ragged patrol of *stariki,* or harmless-looking old men, would slip out after curfew and bag a German patrol which had gone too far afield in search of food. A woman, walking on tiptoe to avoid exploding a few sticks of home-made dynamite, would succeed in blowing up a truck full of precious gasoline. A girl would worm a bit of information out of an officer she allowed to make love to her. A boy of ten would slip poison into a Hun stew-pot. . . .

DURING those days, Alesha Popovich, the red-haired nurse, acted as Tommy's guide while he familiarized himself with the city. She was a jolly companion who refused to be awed or frightened by the horrors around them. Formerly she had been an Intourist guide and knew Kiev like a book. As they worked together Tommy grew more and more fond of Alesha. In fact, he had to stop himself sternly many times when his mind began painting pictures of the two of them spending the rest of their lives together.

"Guerrilla headquarters are located in the crypts and caverns of the ancient Petchersk Lavre monastery," Alesha explained to him at the beginning of one of their trips. "The monastery dates back to the tenth century—you know, Kiev was the first place in Russia where Christianity was preached. These rooms were once the cells where thousands of pale-faced monks prayed and toiled over their illuminated manuscripts during the Middle Ages."

"Haven't the Germans searched the catacomb?"

"Some of it. But it didn't do them any good because they never got back to their superiors to report what they had found. We saw to that."

"But haven't they thrown a cordon about the place, at least?"

"Of course. But the caverns, which honeycomb the entire Petchersk section of Old Kiev, have hundreds of connections with the city sewers. We come and go more or less as we please. At first my stomach used to turn over every time I went into the sewers, but now I rather like them. They're safe. And sometimes I think that the very sewer rats know we're friends. They seldom bother us. But the Germans fear them like the plague."

"And a plague they'll bring one of these days if the filth and garbage continue to collect," he grunted as they emerged from the caverns at last and gazed upon the desolation which was Kiev. The multitude of golden domes and crosses that give the city it's eerie oriental appearance were smoke-blackened and tottering. Fangs of broken glass made windows look like the mouths of dead ogres. One vast pile of buildings in particular seemed as if it had been run through a meat grinder.

"That's the University of St. Vladimir," explained Alesha. "Before the war it had a library of two hundred thousand volumes—one of the finest in all Europe. The Germans used them for fire wood last winter!"

"The devil!" He felt sick.

"The word should be plural." She shrugged strong shoulders under her tattered sheepskin coat. Then, with a grin: "But let me tell you about St. Vladimir. He was also Tsar Vladimir the First, of the province of Kiev back in the old days. When the priests traveled up from Byzantium and told him about Christianity, Vladimir decided that he would embrace the new religion. And he sent a tasseled messenger to the Pope, saying he wanted to be baptized. Well, the Pope probably had never heard of Kiev, so he replied that if Vladimir wished to be a

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Christian he'd have to come to Byzantium as a simple penitent and beg forgiveness for his sins."

"I'll bet he liked that."

"Did he? He raged and swore, they say, and declared he wouldn't beg for baptism but would take it like a Russian should."

"Then what happened?" asked Tommy as they shrank into a ruined doorway at the sight of an enemy motorcyclist careening down the street.

"Shhh! He's all alone, the fool!" hissed Alesha. As the cyclist drew opposite them, her hand flashed out of her coat pocket and a small round object hurtled into the street. "'Duck!" she gasped.

The German and his machine disintegrated as the grenade exploded.

"Now we'll have to run for it. There's a man-hole down the block."

"But you didn't finish telling me about St. Vladimir," said Tommy as they splashed and slithered their way through the sewer toward headquarters.

"OH, YES." The girl chuckled as though she had already forgotten the man she had killed. "Well, the Tsar rallied an army of I don't know how many men. And he marched to the very walls of Byzantium. Once there he sent another messenger to Basil, the Emperor of all the Eastern Roman Empire. 'My Lord Tsar of Kiev has heard,' this bearded, leather-clad swordsman told the effeminate emperor on his golden throne, 'that you have a beautiful daughter named Anna. And my Lord Tsar is willing to take her as his wife. Otherwise . . .' And he shrugged his broad shoulders and looked thoughtfully at the city walls."

"And then what happened?" Tommy kicked at a rat which was attacking his boots, and wondered if he dared slip an arm around Alesha's waist. He decided he didn't.

"Well, what do you expect? First the emperor was going to have the messenger beheaded. And then he decided he'd better take a look at Vladimir's army. And finally he said, sure, the Tsar of Kiev could have not only Anna but five of his other daughters if he'd just go 'way in peace."

"Really and truly?"

"It's in the history books. But that's not all. Basil then had an audience with the Pope and begged him to baptize that awful Russian at once and let him begone to his forests."

"And did he?"

"What do *you* think? After that, Vladimir, his bride and his army marched back to Kiev. And upon the day of his arrival he issued an edict that all the people of the province must bring to the imperial palace the stone and wooden idols which they and their forefathers had worshipped since the dawn of time. When the images were collected into a pile a hundred feet high, the Tsar commanded his soldiers to throw them all into the Dnieper. And he also ordered their owners to be thrown after them unless they accepted Christianity. The historians say that nobody got his feet wet that day."

"Alesha," said Tommy suddenly, "I like you. You're . . . you're cute."

She was not startled. Neither did she laugh at him as he had half expected. Instead, she stopped, ankle-deep in the muck, and lifted her flashlight so that its beam illuminated both their dirty faces. "Go on," she whispered.

"Well, I . . . I more than like you. I was thinking, while you told that story about St. Vladimir, that it would be wonderful to be near you . . . to hear your voice . . . always. We . . . well, we sort of fit together, I think." He hesitated as he saw a twinkle grow-

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ing in her black eyes. "Of course, if you don't . . ."

"Of course I do, silly. I knew the minute I started bandaging your head that day. Only . . ." Her mirth bubbled over at last. "Only I was just wondering if ever in this world a girl had been made love to in a sewer," With that she caught his grimy hand in hers, slipped her elbow between his side and his arm and they walked on together, shoulder to shoulder, in the fashion of Russian lovers since time began. Tommy found time to wonder whether Vladimir had walked back to Kiev with his new Tsarina under his arm in this fashion.

AFTER their first clash, the parachutist and Commander Kyrilo got along famously and soon were drawing up plans looking toward the greater confusion of the Axis.

"I tell you, Tommy," Kyrilo boasted once, "we've already got the Boche scared here in Kiev. Parties of less than twenty soldiers don't dare stir abroad at night. Also, we learn and pass the word up to the front lines when reinforcements for the enemy are coming through this territory. Last December we even caught a general and sent him all the way to Stalingrad to be questioned."

"Yes," grinned Tommy. "That was good work, except that by the time he got there the information he brought was out of date."

The ex-tanner scratched his ear. "That was because the enemy had captured our radio transmitter. For the same reason we haven't yet dared operate the new one you brought."

"What same reason?"

"Well, comrade, the truth of the matter is that here in Kiev the Germans have a master radio sleuth. He can spot a new station within an hour after we set it up. First he jams the transmission . . . makes *piroshki* out of our signals so that nobody can understand them. And then he locates and raids the set. Four of them we've lost already . . . along with some of our best men. All of our guerrilla bands have receivers, of course, so that they can keep up with the progress of the war. If I could get instructions to them by air instead of depending on messengers, we'd really make the Germans do a bear dance here. But that black-shirted dog of a Karl Helmut is always on our trail."

"Can't you liquidate him?"

"We've tried again and again, but Gauleiter Schwartz has given him a guard of fifty soldiers. It's impossible."

"Tut," said Tommy. "We don't use that word in Russia any more. Maybe we can discredit this Herr Helmut. I think I have a friend who can solve our problem. Now, what else is bothering you? You know, I have orders to help you any way I can."

"It's the German labor draft that drives me crazy," groaned the guerrilla leader. "Schwartz has ruled that every month five hundred girls must be turned over to him. He picks names out of the city census records at random. If those whose names are called don't appear, substitutes must be presented. Otherwise he cuts off the city's food supply. We defied him once and Kiev almost starved to death. He's a man of his word. Have you a friend who can solve that problem, too?"

"Maybe." Tommy's grin was cocky, as usual. "Tell you what. I'll crawl down the sewer and see those friends of mine. If I make a deal, will you back me, no matter how mad it sounds?"

"*Da,*" grunted Kyrilo. "I'd make a deal with the devil himself to save those girls."

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"You may have to, at that."

That night Tommy lugged the transmitter back through the sewer. Finding Baba Yaga's hut seemed an impossible task, but his luck held. The squirrel was waiting at the bank of the river as though by prearrangement. This fact convinced the soldier that his "bourgeois superstition" had a basis in fact.

"Time you got here," squeaked his guide. "I thought that red-haired female had made you forget your duty. The Baba is waiting. And she doesn't like to. But don't come too near me. You smell like a Hun."

When they reached the hovel, Baba had just finished putting the final repairs on her mortar.

"Will that crate carry double?" asked Tommy.

"The devil often rides with me," smirked the witch.

"Fine." He swung the radio over the side and climbed in beside it. "I want you to take a run over the Podol section of Kiev. The ceiling's low tonight, so those searchlights shouldn't bother you."

BABA YAGA picked up her broom with one hand, lifted her skirts to her bony knees with the other and hopped in beside him. She muttered and the mortar rose effortlessly. A few more runes, and it was scudding south as noiselessly as a glider. Ten minutes later they caught sight of belching smokestacks underneath which slave labor from all over Europe was toiling to produce war equipment for Hitler. In the midst of the factory district were the vast railroad yards where hundreds of switch engines were puffing and snorting as they made up ammunition and food trains for the front.

Tommy unlimbered the transmitter at this point.

"Calling Gauleiter Schwartz," he chanted. "Calling Gauleiter Schwartz. This is to inform you that the guerrillas of Kiev will tolerate your insolence no longer. Here then is the ultimatum of the guerrillas. You and your *sobakas* have just three days to evacuate the city. If you're not gone by that time, you will be liquidated."

He repeated the message over and over until, half an hour later, he could see armored cars converging on the yards from all parts of the city. Karl Helmut's triangulators had done their job.

"They'll search every box car looking for this station," Tommy grinned. "That will block traffic for the rest of the night and give Helmut a big black mark with Herr Schwartz. And if the munitions are delayed we'll have saved a few thousand Russian lives."

"I think I'll give the devil the sack and have you ride with me every night," crooned the witch. Her little eyes were shining.

"Thanks, babe. Now let's hover over the imperial palace a while and give our gauleiter the scare of their life."

Above the gilt-domed monstrosity which was German headquarters he continued his horseplay until once more the radio spotters came streaming from all directions. Just before switching off he purred: "Herr Schwartz: This broadcast was brought to you through the courtesy of the guerrillas of Kiev, from stations located in the railroad yards and in the dungeons of the Imperial Palace."

"Helmut will have some more explaining to do now," Tommy chuckled. "I have a feeling he may face a firing squad in the morning for his failure to catch us."

"Where next?"

"Next take me to Kostchei. And

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don't spare the magic."

The wizard's cave was exactly as Tommy's grandmother had so often described it. It was set deep between barren hills. And it was appropriately dark, bat-filled and huge. Decorations were provided by dead white stalactites and stalagmites which met like the broken teeth of some eldritch monster.

Baba Yaga guided her mortar skillfully through these dripping obstructions until at last she found Kostchei crouched over a little fire in the farthest recess, playing with Jurka and Vashka.

Kostchei the Deathless faintly resembled a man. That was the only way Berennikov could describe him. He had two legs, two arms and a torso dressed in black kaftan, high boots and a skull cap. As for his face . . . well, it varied. When the visitors first caught sight of it in the leaping shadows, it looked so old as to be decayed. But when the wizard noticed them, the features seemed to flow together and assume a cherubic smile.

"Welcome, little grandmother. Welcome, O champion who kills eight at one blow," screamed their host in his undisguisable treble. "You come to ask for help. And you come to the right place."

Then his eyes narrowed and his face underwent another kaleidoscopic change. It became that of a respectable, tight-fisted *kulak* who believed that "that man in the Kremlin" was ruining him. "But don't ask me for gold again," warned this grim visage. "Not another rouble will I give to bribe the Germans. Their cupidity is greater than my poor horde."

"Oh, be yourself," snapped Baba Yaga. She grounded the mortar, hopped out, flopped on the floor and thrust her feet to the edge of the fire.

As an answer to this quip, Kostchei simply disappeared.

"Humph!" sniffed the witch. "I thought so. Just an illusion, aren't you?"

"That's a communist lie!" thundered a reconstituted Kostchei, who towered almost to the roof and seemed about to stamp them into the dirt.

"Stop that foolishness," yelled the Baba. "No red-baiting, either. We've got work to do."

"Yes'm," was the meek answer, and the wizard telescoped into a little man in overalls, with a hammer in one hand and a sickle in the other. "How's this?"

"Ridiculous, as usual, but it will do. And stay that way. I'm getting dizzy."

"Very well, Comrade Yagowitch. "Call the meeting to order."

"THE first point on the agenda," said the witch with a snaggle-toothed grin, "is this: The guerrillas have solved the problem of how to use their radio. We've put it in my mortar and use it while flying over Kiev. In that way it can't be located and we will be able to co-ordinate the activities of various fighting units."

"Don't tell me you thought that one up. Tommy, have a drink of *pevau* out of that bottle to your right. You deserve it. Now, what's the second point . . . the one that brought you here?"

"Just this," Tommy interrupted. "Friday is the day when another allotment of girls must report for transportation to German labor camps. We want to prevent this, but on the other hand, we can't let the whole city starve. Perhaps you can suggest a way out."

"In the first place," said Kostchei, "Kiev will never actually starve, no matter what the guerrillas do. German production is falling steadily and the

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Boches are in desperate need of the products of our industries. Reluctant slave labor, such as the Russians have been providing under the lash, is much better for them than no labor at all. In fact, it's quite possible that a real demonstration of strength by the guerrillas right now might bring better conditions for the population, rather than worse. The Germans are not the arrogant super-men they were when they first captured Kiev. They're scared of their own shadows now. And they might be frightened into easing things up a bit rather than face widespread revolution."

"Papa Kostchei," grinned Tommy, "you talk like a political commissar."

"Thank you." And promptly the protean wizard assumed the guise of a shaven-pated, khaki-clad commissar, complete with automatic and full cartridge belt.

"I thought I told you to stop that," shrieked the Baba.

"Sorry. I forgot. Now, as for the plans for an uprising. They are very simple, and so obvious that I cry shame on the profession of witchcraft that Baba Yaga has not thought of them. They're really in her province, you see. But since neither of you have the wit to use your own wits, I'll explain. First . . . " And he went into the details of a plot which soon had Tommy and the witch dancing for joy around the fire.

"A fine wizard is Kostchei," sighed the Baba when she and Berennikov were once more aboard the mortar and flitting bat-like toward the hut. "They don't make them like that nowadays. Only trouble with him is that he has no ambition. Why, with his brains and my feminine intuition we could rule the world."

"Humph," said Tommy. "You're talking like a fascist now."

For answer she inverted the ship!

Instants later she righted it and scooped up Tommy as he fell headlong through space.

"That will teach you," she grinned at her bruised and gasping passenger, "to insult a first class witch."

"But it's true," he cried, hanging on with both hands. "Only fascists and fools talk of ruling the world."

"You're a brave young man . . . and a wise one. Let's say no more about it."

BACK at the hut, the parachutist installed the transmitter firmly in the mortar. Then he gave the Baba careful directions in its use.

"You're sure you know exactly what to do?" he asked at last.

"My dear!" She threw back her old head proudly. "I will give such a performance that even Hitler will go hide under his bed."

Whereupon Tommy slapped her on her bony back and then, led by the exasperated and sleepy squirrel, wended his way to the sewer.

Kyrilo and the guerrilla command listened to the fantastic plan of Kostchei in silence and growing wonder.

"It will work," the ex-tanner shouted at last, slapping his great hands together until the catacomb resounded. Then turning to a sallow, lean individual who was his second in command, he asked: "Don't you think it will work, Lieutenant Muromets."

"I would say yes, on its merits. But I don't like the superstitious claptrap with which Berennikov has surrounded it."

"Comrade Popovich, what do you say?" asked Kyrilo.

"I vote yes for the women of Kiev," Alesha answered. Then, coming to her sweetheart's rescue, she added: "And if word gets 'round that the Old

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Ones are helping us defend our *rodina* —our fatherland—so much the better. In these times, even what Lieutenant Muromets called superstitious claptrap may have its uses."

Kyrilo looked at the other officers in the room for confirmation. Finding it, he began issuing crisp instructions. . . .

FRIDAY morning broke gray, with low-hanging, tearful clouds—just such a morning as Kostchei had promised. At dawn the Petchersk catacombs were humming with activity as five-hundred conscripts-to-be started their preparations. Some two hundred of them really were girls—husky Amazons such as only Russia seems able to produce. They had volunteered for the dangerous job ahead. And now, as though they had not a care in the world, they were giggling and joking as they rigged up some three hundred even huskier guerrillas in feminine attire. A mountain of skirts and shawls and concealing sheepskin coats had been piled in the center of the floor of one of the largest crypts. And now these were tried on and pinned up on the men until they lost all trace of masculinity.

Tommy was resplendent in gypsy costume, his swarthy, handsome face crowned with heavy braids until he looked as if he had been reading fortunes all his life. Kyrilo was the hardest to disguise, but the task was accomplished somehow with the aid of a blond wig, cushions at appropriate places and unsparing applications of lipstick and rouge. When he saw the finished product Tommy had great difficulty restraining himself from rolling on the floor.

"Kyrilushka," he whooped. "You would make a fit mistress for the gauleiter himself."

The tanner, feeling completely a fool, growled back at him:

"Let's hope this doesn't prove to be a trap, Comrade Berennikov. I've always wanted to die with my boots on, but to die in these skirts would be a bit too much."

When the masquerade was completed, the "ladies" proceeded to arm themselves. Into their voluminous pockets went amazing numbers of grenades and automatics. And the few tommy-guns remaining to the guerrillas were loaded, and wrapped to resemble parcels of food and clothing.

Alesha, who had been placed in charge of all this, finally surveyed her handiwork with approval.

"We are ready, Commander Kyrilo," she reported briskly. "What are your orders?"

"Leave here by ones and twos at intervals and through separate exits. Assemble at the city hall at noon. Ten or fifteen of you may act as if you knew each other. The rest must appear to be strangers. Cry if you can. If the guards mistreat you, do not resist. You are all helpless youngsters, remember. If the Germans behave as they have done on all previous occasions you will be herded into the courtyard of the Imperial Palace. That's so Schwartz can have the satisfaction of telling you how lucky you are. When he comes out to address you I will wave my babushka. Then let go at the guards with everything you have. The rest of our people will be among the crowds outside the palace. After that we shall see what we shall see."

A tall brunette—femininity unquestionable—elbowed her way forward out of the shadows. Tommy looked at her goggle-eyed. The newcomer was a raving beauty, even in her old rags. Her stately figure, raven hair and flashing eyes could have graced the

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court of Ivan the Terrible.

"Comrade Kyrilo," she began. And Tommy drew in his breath sharply; there was no mistaking that high-pitched voice. "I am Ludmilla, a sharpshooter from Kharkov. You may have heard of me. I've killed one hundred and eighty-one fascists—although not exactly at one blow. I arrived in Kiev only this morning. Here are my credentials," she added hastily as a group of guerrillas started to close in around her. "I am one of you."

"What do you want, Comrade Ludmilla?" Kyrilo's voice was puzzled.

"I have one favor to ask. I have heard that Gauleiter Schwartz always asks for a spokeswoman to be appointed from among the captives. Let me be that spokeswoman."

"What do you think, Tommy?" whispered the tanner dubiously.

"Let her speak," grinned the parachutist, playing his hunch. "If I'm not mistaken, Ludmiller will have something to say which Schwartz will remember even after he's dead."

AT eleven the solemn parade out of the catacombs began. Tommy, Kyrilo and Alesha went together, the first two tripping over their full skirts and the girl managing hers so gracefully that she became more alluring than ever. Tommy couldn't keep his eyes off her.

They wedged themselves out of the ruined masonry of a bombed building and trudged through the snow-covered, hilly streets toward the appointed place on the square. After a while other groups fell in behind them.

A heavily armed squad of SS men was waiting at the rendezvous. These leering blond brutes noted nothing amiss. Instead they began to jibe at their voluntary prisoners with coarse Aryan humor.

"Yah," sneered one browless wretch who disgraced a lieutenant's uniform. "Here come the cows for milking again." He swung a polished boot at the posterior of one well-padded girl and sent her sprawling on hands and knees in the slush.

A roar of laughter greeted this sally and other troopers seemed about to engage in the horseplay. If this went on their ruse could not fail to be discovered!

"Halten!" The command of a lantern-jawed captain quelled the uproar. "Fools. The Gauleiter wants these wenches brought before him in a presentable condition. Later you can have your fun with them."

The captain whipped out a list and began reading off names. Naturally few of the prisoners were owners of the names called. But Tommy and Alesha had drilled them well. The roll-call was answered until four hundred and fifty "Presents" had been shouted. Then, to make the performance ring true, fifty other girls—authentic ones—explained that they were substitutes—sent to make up the roll when the original draftees were dead, ill, or missing.

Finally the officer grunted, snapped shut his notebook and ordered them to fall in. A band struck up the Horst Wessel song and the pitiful little procession started toward the palace. A lump came into Tommy's throat as he saw that the sidewalks were lined solid with the citizens of Kiev. The onlookers did not weep. They did not speak. They did not move. Each one, from the merest child to the oldest grandmother, stood rigidly at attention, saluting their martyrs.

In silence, except for the hated tooting, the supposedly terrified girls shuffled across the city until they reached the baroque edifice where the gauleiter made his headquarters. It had been a

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tsar's plaything once. Later it had been turned into a museum, intact with its ikons and ugly gilded furniture. Now it looked slovenly and somehow ashamed of its ultimate degradation.

Through a double line of lip-licking SS men they were herded into the courtyard, a vast area of cobblestones which opened onto the street through an incredible archway. Guards showed them roughly until they were huddled in the center around an iron grating from which came the reek of a sewer. Facing them was a filigree balcony which some tsar had bought in India and installed as a white anachronism on this gloomy pile. And there, after an interminable, freezing wait, Gauleiter Schwartz appeared to greet them.

THE German boss was immaculately uniformed. He carried a swagger stick and his cadaverous face sported a glittering monocle. For a long time he surveyed the prisoners in silence. Finally, satisfied that a sufficient audience had collected outside the archway, he cleared his throat and began in atrocious Russian:

"Heil Hitler. I am glad to learn that on this occasion the labor draft has been filled without disorder. This means that the people of this city have at last realized that it is hopeless to oppose the New Order." His thin lips drew back in what was meant for a smile. "To you women who are going to the Reich I say that you will have plenty of food and the best of treatment. You will work hard for the Fatherland. And after Germany has won the war you will be allowed to return home to spread the gospel of national socialism among your families and friends. By that time you will have learned the blessings which Der Fuehrer has showered upon Europe."

"Let me shoot the pig now, Kyrilo," whispered Alesha.

Kyrilo shook his be-wigged head and Schwartz continued:

"It has been my custom to allow each group of draftees to select a spokeswoman—someone who can act as a representative of the group until it is disbanded. Is there any among you who will act so?"

There was a stir among the shapeless bundles of femininity in the yard and Ludmilla pushed her way forward. No baggy sheepskin concealed her charms. She was smart in a Cossack hat, leather coat, short skirt and floppy boots. Tommy saw the gauleiter's monocle slip out of his eye. At the unexpected sight of such a magnificent specimen, the German's hands gripped the balcony railing until his knuckles shone white.

The spell was not broken even when the sharpshooter cried in her piercing voice that she had been elected as the spokeswoman.

"Have you any requests to make before you march to the station?" Schwartz was fairly drooling.

"I have, your highness. I believe I can promise you the wholehearted cooperation of all my friends here on one condition."

"What is that condition?"

Ludmilla hung her handsome head and actually blushed.

"I'd rather we spoke of it in private, your highness," she simpered, clasping her hands and swinging them in front of her.

"Well, in that case, perhaps you'd better come up here."

"What the devil?" growled Kyrilo, as the woman started mounting the broad outside staircase which led to the balcony. "She's going to betray us."

"I don't think so," Tommy whispered. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. We're ready." Then his jaw fell. "Look!"

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As Ludmilla ran up the steps she began to change in a horrible fashion. First, her face lost its haunting beauty and turned into a slavering muzzle. Then her head sank between her shoulders. And finally her clothing vanished and grey fur began to sprout on a body which was also developing a long, lean tail with every jump.

A wild shout went up from the prisoners and the peering crowd behind them. But Schwartz and his SS bodyguard stood paralyzed.

Before a shot could be fired, the creature had reached the balcony. Straight at the gauleiter's throat it leaped, squeaking like a violin gone mad. The German dropped his swagger stick and threw up his arms against the onslaught. The shock of the attack whirled him against the balcony railing. He screamed and struck out wildly. Then he tottered over the edge and plunged into the courtyard. When he hit the cobbles, the slavering thing was still on his chest, slashing at his throat.

TOMMY could see it clearly now—a gigantic gray rat with evil red eyes and fangs like razors. Schwartz lay where he had fallen. And the rat fed contentedly until a burst of pistol fire showed that the bodyguard had partially recovered from the shock. The monster, at this, flung up its muzzle and set up a defiant squealing loud as that of a pig caught under a gate. Then a second miracle happened. Out of the sewer grating in the center of the yard came pouring a horde of other rats. They were normal in size, but equally gray, filthy and vicious. They came by thousands, belching out like a fountain seen in a nightmare.

And with one accord they hurled themselves upon the milling soldiers and SS men, leaping at throats and hands; swarming up boots and trouser legs. Pandemonium reigned as the Fritzes kicked and yelled in terror while trying to reach the stairs or the street.

At that moment Kyrilo waved his almost-forgotten babushka and the prisoners began hurling their grenades and unlimbering their tommy-guns. Struck by several bombs, the flimsy white balcony and its human and animal freight collapsed into the yard. And Tommy knew, without question, that the palace had been won.

But other troops, attracted by the uproar, came running from both ends of the street. This was the cue for the citizens of Kiev, who up to this point had been watching spellbound.

Snatching up discarded German rifles and uprooting paving stones, they turned upon their astonished conquerors and drove them hence, howling.

Shooting now became general all over the district. And by this Tommy knew that other guerrilla bands and Boche patrols had joined in the fray. Next, the air raid sirens began screaming as a signal for emergency mobilization. Hell was breaking loose in Kiev and it might be hours, if not days, before the Germans would be able to restore any kind of order.

But this preliminary victory was too good to last. Tommy knew it as soon as he heard the rattle of heavy machine gun fire start far down the street. Soon a platoon of mechanized troops, headed by light tanks, swept toward them through the fog and snow which had begun to fall again. Their guns mowed great swaths through the unarmed citizenry and soon these were fleeing in all directions. But the prisoners and the guerrilla groups which had joined them closed ranks and held their ground before the palace, firing from behind doors and windows and hastily improvised barricades.

In the midst of the hand-to-hand com-

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bat Tommy caught sight of a huge warrior, clad in the chain mail of ancient days and swinging a double-edged sword.

"Well done, Kostchei," he shouted as he picked off a Boche who was heaving hand grenades from the roof of the palace.

"Poetic justice," the wizard grinned back, wiping his blood-smeared face. "Rats to the rats!" He punctuated the remark by slicing an enemy almost in two before he disappeared into the ruck of the fighting.

By this time the defenders were vastly outnumbered and it seemed only a matter of time before they must be overpowered. Tommy, however, refused to concede defeat. He had planned this battle along the lines of those of the legendary Berennikov: Imitate the enemy's strategy but go him one better and you can't fail!

Nevertheless, he couldn't keep from glancing anxiously at the sky as the enemy horde closed in for the kill. Could it be possible that Baba Yaga had failed to carry out her assignment?

At last he heard what he had been waiting for—the low, far-away thunder of airplanes. The witch had got through—had taken her mortar and the transmitter outside the range of fascist jamming and had radioed to Moscow for help. Now the Red Air Fleet was on its way.

Soon wave after wave of crimson-starred bombers and fighters loomed out of the mist—flying so low they barely skimmed the roof-tops. No anti-aircraft fire greeted them. In the confusion they had not been spotted until they were right on top of the city.

The bombers wheeled and headed straight for the railroad yards and the munition dumps whose positions had been given them by the Baba. The fighters swooped down upon the palace and before their deadly strafing the Germans melted away like chaff.

Regardless of danger, Tommy, Kyrilo and Alesha climbed to the roof of the palace to watch the debacle. The bombers—how many hundreds of them they could only guess, were already dropping their cargoes with the precision of long practice. Before their eyes the railroad yards burst apart and blazed to the heavens. Next the three great munition dumps exploded, one after another, with roars that knocked the onlookers to the roof and smashed all of the remaining windows in Kiev. And finally they heard a distant screaming as the fighters circled distant troop cantonments and butchered the milling soldiers they found there. After that the fleet re-assembled, circled high over the palace as though saluting the guerrillas, and headed back toward the northwest. The whole attack had not taken fifteen minutes.

THAT evening, Tommy and Alesha sat close together in the same crypt where they had first met. Before them Kyrilo paced back and forth as he discussed the battle.

"It was really just a skirmish," shrugged the commander at last. "Tonight the city is ours, but tomorrow the Germans will recover from their funk and start hunting us down like wild beasts. So it will go until the Red Army breaks through to us." He scratched his ear thoughtfully. "When that day comes, we guerrillas will still be here—the unyielding anvil upon which our soldier comrades can beat the fascist dogs to bits. And when Kiev is firmly in our hands once more, it spells the end for Hitler."

Looking at the heroic tanner, huge in his leather coat belted with cartridges, Tommy seemed to be hearing once more the soft voice of his grandmother telling

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one of her endless stories: "And at last Kyrilo utterly defeated the dragon who devoured the daughters of Kiev. And he harnessed the monster to a plough of metal so heavy that a hundred oxen could not move it. And the dragon drew the plough from Kiev to the sea and made a furrow twenty fathoms deep. And Kyrilo drove the dragon into the blue sea, and the waters covered him and the plough drew him down through the depths to the nethermost cave of the ocean, and there he lies even now and the plough of Kyrilo the Tanner lies on his back."

"Stay with us, Tommy, until that day comes," Kyrilo was saying when the parachutist recovered from his reverie.

"Yes, stay with us," whispered Alesha, her strong, dirty little hand pressing tightly that of her lover. But what she meant was: "Stay with me."

Tommy shook his head as though to clear away temptation and rose to his feet.

"No." He tried to hold his voice steady. "My work is done here. You have your radio and a method of using it. Now my orders are to report back to Moscow. I must start at once—tonight."

But looking into Alesha's stricken eyes he was recalling the end of those *skazki* about another Tommy who had killed eight at one blow: "And so," it went, "because of his boasting and his conceit, and also because the earth could not spare such a hero just at that time when the Mongols were sweeping down upon Mother Russia from the East, Berennikov was shut out from Paradise, and he must needs return again to earth, and live, and live . . . and live."

He made the farewell as painless as possible by swearing to come back to Kiev with the Red Army, if not before. Then he kissed Alesha as much as was good for either of them, shouldered a knapsack, took one last look at his automatic and its precious ammunition, and softly opened and closed the little trapdoor leading into the sewer.

As he sloshed through the fetid darkness he decided to ask Baba Yaga for a lift back to Moscow in her mortar. But when he came to the river, no squirrel awaited him. Instead there was a bit of white cloth, wrapped around a handful of freshly cracked nut meats.

"An omen," he g r i n n e d wryly. "Those who turn their backs on Kiev turn their backs also on the Old Ones." Nevertheless, as he started searching along the bank for some sort of boat on which to cross the river, he resolved that, if it was humanly possible, Baba Yaga should have her Stormovik.

He found the boat at last, a rotten thing which spilled water at every plank. But somehow he crossed the stream and stood for a long time looking toward the blur of darkness that was the Mother of Cities.

In the end, he started off across the snow-covered hills toward far away Moscow. For a time he walked in silence. Then, like a good Russian, he began to sing. It was Alexander Blok's "The Song of the Twelve." And Kostchei, if he was nearby, must have smiled proudly at the words:

"On, with rifles lifted
At the hidden enemy.
Through deaf alleys where the snow
is sifted;
Where the lonely tempest tosses free.
Onward, where the snow is drifted
Clutching at the marcher's knee."

REMEMBER!
BUY WAR BONDS REGULARLY OUT OF EACH PAY CHECK

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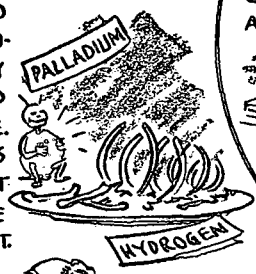
ROMANCE of the ELEMENTS

THE WORLD'S FIRST PALLADIUM WAS NOT FORMALLY ANNOUNCED. IT WAS SIMPLY PLACED WITH A GERRARD STREET, LONDON, DEALER IN 1803 AND ADVERTISED FOR SALE BY MEANS OF A CIRCULAR!

SUSPICIOUS OF FRAUD, DR. RICHARD CHENEVIX BOUGHT UP THE STORE'S SUPPLY, ANALYSED IT — AND SOLEMNLY PROCLAIMED IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY "TRANSACTIONS" THAT PALLADIUM WAS MERELY A PLATINUM ALLOY! HE DIDN'T KNOW THAT THE ISOLATER WAS WOLLASTON, HONORED SECRETARY OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY!

PALLADIUM, CHEAPER THAN PLATINUM, LOOKS LIKE THAT ELEMENT. JEWELRY IS ITS BIG-TIME USE. BECAUSE OF SPECIFIC-GRAVITY DIFFERENCES, ONE OUNCE OF PALLADIUM TURNS OUT NEARLY TWICE AS MANY ARTICLES AS AN OUNCE OF PLATINUM!

WHEN IT COMES TO EATING HYDROGEN, PALLADIUM IS VORACIOUS. IT EASILY ABSORBS MORE THAN 900 TIMES ITS OWN VOLUME. WHEN HOT, PALLADIUM FUSES READILY WITH SULPHUR; BUT IT TAKES A VIOLENT FLAME TO MELT THE PURE ELEMENT.



100 YEARS AGO BRITISH DENTISTS FILLED CAVITIES WITH PALLADIUM ALLOYS. OLD-TIME SURGEONS VACCINATED WITH PALLADIUM LANCES. SILVER, COATED WITH PALLADIUM, IS RESISTENT TO TARNISH.

PALLADIUM is number 46 in the International Table of Atomic Weights. Its symbol is Pd and its atomic weight is 106.7. It is a member of the platinum family, its density being 11.40 and its melting point 1550°. It is a whitish metal, very similar in appearance to platinum. It is enormously valuable as a catalyst in the reduction of hydrogen, or by hydrogen of many other substances. It is valuable in astronomy for instruments of precision.

(Next issue: The Romance of Phosphorus)

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BAT OUT OF HELL

By BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

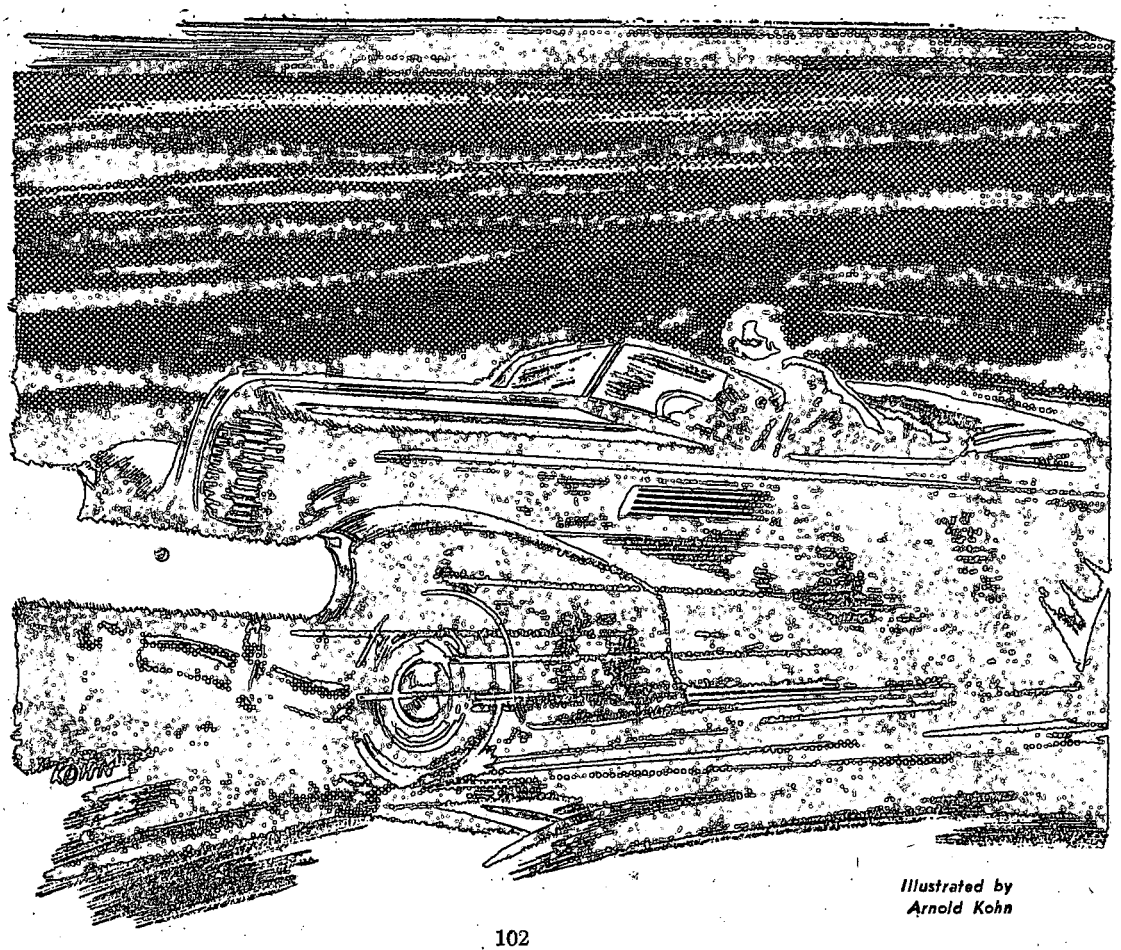
Somehow, Jameson knew his own fate was bound up in that black bat. From Hell's Pit came the horrible confirmation

SAM BLACK, radio's gift to the baseball-fan world, was having a mild case of hysterics. I could hear his high-pitched voice saying:

"What a series! What drama! Folks, there's never been anything like this in all baseball history! Shannon's just asked for time out, so I'll give you a resumé of what's happened."

Although the carpet of the broadcasting booth was thick enough to muffle all sound, I found myself walking on tip-toe.

Jerry Sims, Sam's right-hand man,



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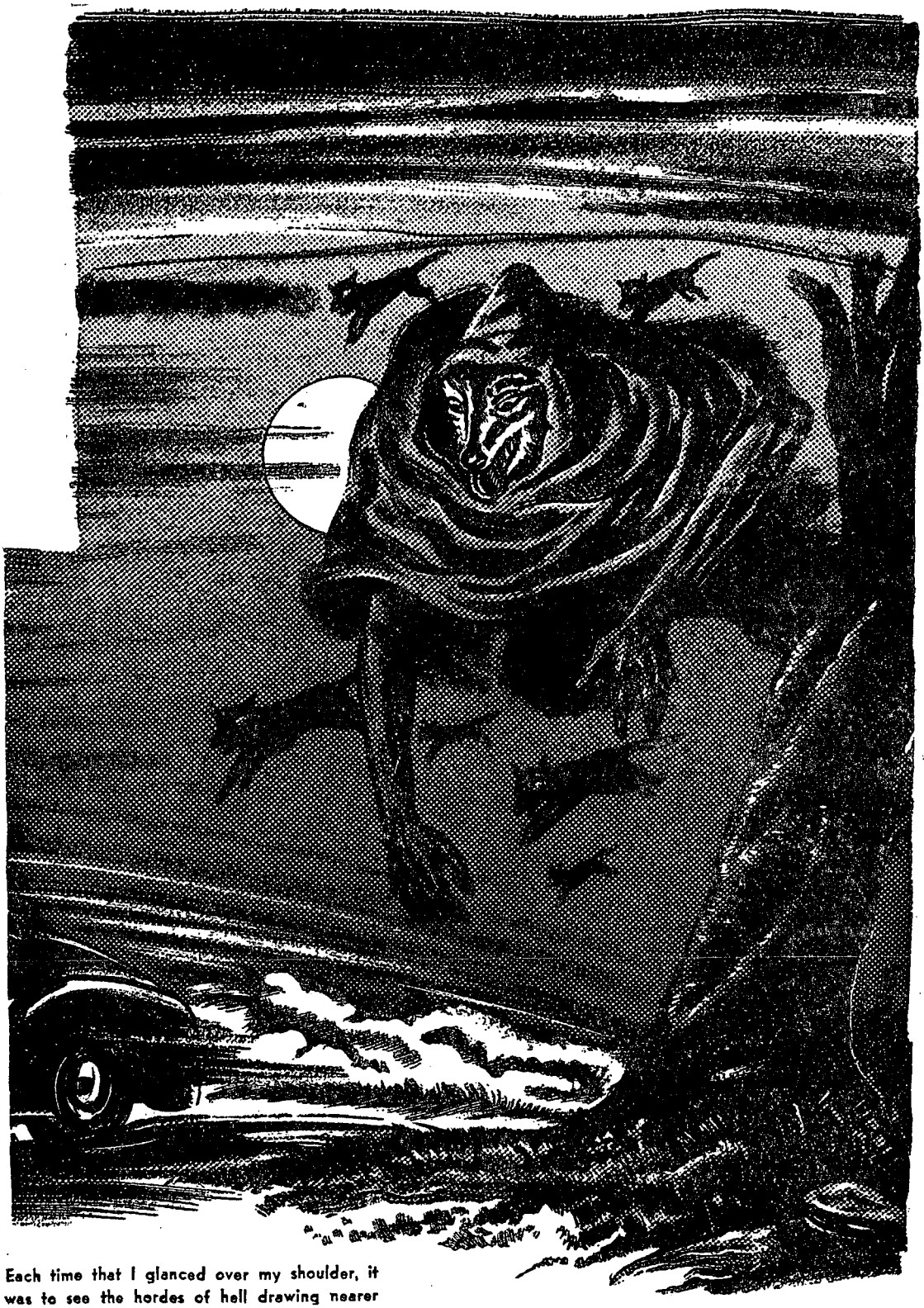

Each time that I glanced over my shoulder, it was to see the hordes of hell drawing nearer

was going over the statistics at his desk. A pair of field glasses lay beside him. I walked over beside Sam at the huge section of window and looked down over Rebel Stadium. He winked a greeting to me, but his voice was directed to the millions of baseball fans listening in.

"So here's the picture: It's the final game of the series; ninth inning; three men on for the Rebels, and Shannon's up. Wow! What drama!

"And to make the situation more dramatic, there are two men out, the tying and winning runs are on base and Shannon had three balls and one strike called on him. So what happened? Shannon, the man who broke up three games in this series by hitting pinch homers in the ninth inning, threw his bat away after missing that second strike! Yep," Sam's voice suddenly took on an air of mystery. "Shannon threw his bat away. Threw away that famous black bat of his! The 'Hex' bat, as he calls it. The same bat he used to compile the greatest batting average in baseball history."

Jerry had finished what he was doing and brought the paper over to Sam.

"Thanks, Jerry," Sam said aloud. "Jerry Sims, my assistant, has just given me the figures. Shannon was up forty-eight times as a pinch hitter and hit forty-four home runs. There's never been anything like it!"

He suddenly became quiet and peered intently out the window. I followed his example. A figure, bat on shoulder, was striding to the plate. The roar of seventy thousand yelling voices reached our ears. And Sam began to talk again. Now it was Sam Black, the famous announcer, giving out in that hushed, "great things are happening" voice.

"All right, folks, here it is. The big moment. Shannon has found a bat he likes. He's up at the plate now! Looks calm. So does Roper out on the mound. Roper looks around to see if his outfield's in position. Watches the base runners carefully to see that they don't take too big a lead. Now he's ready! And here it comes: the pay-off pitch!"

I looked below and for an instant my vision played a trick on me. It was a trick of arrested motion. For, in a second, I saw Roper, his body bent almost to the ground from the effort he had used in throwing the ball; the runners almost to their goals; and Shannon, twisted almost completely around from the terrific swing he had taken. Then bedlam broke out!

"Man oh man!" Sam's voice was high again. "Roper threw a ball right down the middle of the plate and Shannon swung and missed! Missed it by a foot! Listen to that crowd!"

The roar of the huge mob beat in on us in the soundproof booth, like the sound of surf pounding a reef.

"So the Bluebirds win the series and Ed Roper the Bluebird pitcher enters the hall of fame by striking out Shannon to win the deciding game. And now here's Jerry with the complete statistics on the game——"

I DIDN'T wait to hear the rest. Throwing a "see you later" over my shoulder, I made for the private ramp leading down to the field. For I had observed something Sam had missed. Shannon had swung clear around and crumpled to the ground. I say *crumpled,* not fallen. There was something unnatural in the way his body had suddenly lost its life.

That phrase lent wings to my running feet. "Suddenly lost its life!" In my business, that of being a special feature writer on one of New York's largest morning sheets, I had on several occasions been present when someone

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had died violently. Now I remembered that Shannon had fallen just as though he had been shot to death.

I pounded across the dirt-packed area behind the screen and around it to the group gathered at the plate.

MacCauley, the Rebel manager, a short, round-bodied man, looked up with a face filled with wonder. It would have looked silly at any other time, but not now. His lips worked futilely for a few seconds, then words tumbled out:

"Why—why, he's dead! But, how . . . what could have . . . it's crazy ——"

The group had already begun to attract attention. Quickly I pushed through the ring of Rebel players encircling MacCauley and the dead Shannon, and knelt beside the manager.

MacCauley's eyes looked emptily into mine. Again he said:

"Look, he's dead."

But I didn't need the little man's words to tell me that. I had already seen the glassy-looking eyes peering beneath half-parted lids. And the lips, parted in a frozen, macabre grin. Mac was right. Shannon was very, very dead. But, like the manager, I too wanted to know how he died.

Somebody else knelt beside us. The club physician. He looked once, then said:

"Bring him to the dressing room! And someone better call headquarters."

Quickly Shannon's body was lifted from the ground. Policemen cleared the way through the crowd which had gathered in those few minutes. I followed the players into the dressing room.

Shannon's body was placed on a rubdown table. MacCauley and the club physician stood together at the side of the table. There was a frown on the doctor's face. That frown settled something for me. That sixth sense, which told me there was a story to be had, hadn't lied.

"Something wrong, Doc?" I asked.

The doctor looked at me and said.

"Oh, hello, Jameson. Uh. Well—I don't know."

"Come now, Doctor," I prodded. "What do you mean?"

The doctor nibbled at his lower lip and the frown came back to his forehead.

"Just what I said," he declared irritably. "I don't know! But I examined Shannon just yesterday. And I'll take an oath he was in perfect physical shape."

I had been looking at the corpse while the doctor was talking. Shannon had fallen with his left cheek pressed against the ground. But when they had laid him on the table, his right cheek was to the boards. And I had noticed something very strange. Two tiny drops of blood had coagulated on his throat.

THE doctor had followed my gaze and bent down for a closer examination. So did I. There were two, tiny perforations in Shannon's throat, as though he had been pricked by a needle or large pin.

"Curious," the doctor said in a low voice as he straightened up, "very, very curious."

"Why, Doctor?" I asked.

He went on talking in that low voice. It was as though he hadn't heard me, but was answering a question he had asked himself.

"It can't be! But I'd swear those marks were made by the teeth of a bat! And a very large one at that!"

All I could say to that was: "Hunh?"

But before he could explain his odd statement, the Homicide men had arrived. I knew better than to ask the lieutenant if I might stay. Homicide favored nobody. I went with the rest.

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I walked up the narrow concrete walk from the Rebels' dressing room completely unaware of my surroundings. I passed small groups of low-voiced players discussing this strange end to a strange series. But I was only half aware of them.

Another part of my consciousness puzzled over Shannon's end. And those tiny holes. And the doctor's words. It just didn't add up.

I had decided on the course I was going to take: get my information from Thomas, our sports editor—when I almost fell over 'Corny,' the Rebel bat boy. He had two full bat bags slung over his shoulders. I knew they were full because I had received them both in the pit of my stomach.

"Oh gee, Mr. Jameson," he said quickly. "I'm sorry. Hope I didn't hurt ya."

"That's all right, kid," I said, when I recovered my breath. "Was my fault anyway. Should have looked where I was going. What the devil do you carry in those bags? Telephone poles?"

I knew what he had in them. But an idea had come to me. This kid had more opportunity to listen to the personal conversations of the players than any reporter ever had. And like all youngsters, he would remember those incidents which were out of the ordinary. Then too, I had once written an article on the subject of being a bat boy on a big league team and had used Corny as an example. I knew I stood high on his list of heroes.

"Gee, Mr. Jameson," he said, letting the bags fall with a clatter, "I got the players' bats in here."

I said, "H'mm."

"Yup," he went on, "all the regular bats. Even Mr. Shannon's!"

I could have kissed him. I let my face register a faint curiosity.

Having spoken Shannon's name aloud, Corny thought it would be polite to offer his condolences.

"Boy, that was tough," the youngster went on. He shook his head regretfully. "The guy could'a been a hero. So he winds up a tramp; and a dead one, at that."

I quickly brought the conversation back to where I wanted it—on Shannon's bat.

"He was kind of screwy about that bat of his, wasn't he?" I prompted.

"Screwy!" The kid's voice climbed the register. "Holy cats! That guy was nuts when it came to his bat! And if you ask me, that guy was nuts anyway," he finished sourly.

"How's that?"

"Do you know that goon slept with the bat!"

"Slept—with the bat," I hesitantly said.

"Sure. Ask Larry Adams, his roommate. I heard Larry telling some guys about it. He said that Shannon would polish it up every night before going to bed, then he'd lay it down right beside him. Gee, what a character that Shannon was."

I RELAXED. Corny was going to relate anecdotes. And some of them were going to add up to something.

"I remember," Corny went on, "when 'Bull' Chambers told the boys about the time he took Shannon out on a drunk. Bat and all. Shannon wouldn't go unless the bat went. And then the goof gets the meemies, and almost wrecked the joint they were in."

"Meemies?"

"Sure! Y'know: snakes, pink elephants. That kind of stuff."

"Oh."

"Yah. S'funny thing, Mr. Jameson, Shannon wasn't a drinker though. At least no one ever saw him bend an elbow."

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I had to grin at this fifteen-year-old's choice of expressions. But they were giving me a truer picture of the man than any other words would have given.

Corny was laughing at something which had come to his mind.

"Holy cats! The funniest thing, though, was when Larry Adams told about the nightmares Shannon used to get. Boy! Larry said the first time it happened it scared the pajamas off him. Shannon gets out of bed hollering at the top of his lungs. And he's swinging the bat around like he's trying to brain somebody. He runs around the room swingin' the bat at this thing and finally trips over a chair. Boy! The way Larry told it, I thought I'd die laughing."

"You mean that used to happen regularly?" I asked.

"'Cording to Larry it did. And once Larry came down with a black eye. He tried to take the bat away from Shannon. And the goof clouted him. Like when Croucher wanted to use the bat in the last White Sox series. Shannon came tearing out of the dugout and knocked Croucher cold!"

"Say," I said, "let's look at this wonderful bat that Shannon thought so much of."

Corny looked around first to make sure the coast was clear. Then he unzipped the bag and drew out the famous black bat. I took it from him, turning it about in my hands as I examined it. It looked just like any other bat to me. Except that it had no manufacturer's name on it. Of course, any number of players had their bats custom made. But even then there was the name of the man on it. This bat, though, was blank. The only thing which marred its gleaming surface, was a long, white scratch where it had scraped the concrete when Shannon threw it.

"Look Corny," I said after my examination, "how would you like to do me a favor?"

"Sure, Mr. Jameson."

"Let me have this bat for a couple of days."

"Oh, I couldn't do that! Mr. Mac'd have a fit!"

"Now look," I said carefully, "did anyone see you pick the bat up?"

"N-no."

"There you are. If anyone should ask, you didn't see it. Besides, I only want it for a couple of days. And here's a little something to show my appreciation."

I had taken a bill out of my pocket and slipped it into his hand while I was talking. That did it. The bat went under my jacket and I was on my way.

I STOPPED off at the office on my way home. I wanted to see Thomas and get as much information as I could about Shannon. I soon discovered there wasn't much to be gotten. As Thomas said:

"That guy was as empty of color as a gray sweater. Don't know a hell of a lot about him. Came from someplace near Salem, Massachusetts. Showed up at the park one day around the middle of the season and demanded a tryout. Everybody thought he was nuts. So I guess Dawson, the coach, thought he'd have a little fun. Told him to get up to the plate. Then he sends Chambers out to pitch. The rest is history. He hit Chambers all over the lot. Too bad he couldn't field worth a damn. Would have been the greatest player in history."

Thomas' clipped sentences hadn't added to my store of information. Except for one thing: Shannon came from somewhere near Salem. The thing was as crazy as a jig-saw puzzle invented by an idiot.

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For hours I sat in my easy chair, bat in lap, and tried to make sense of the Shannon affair. I had read all the newspaper accounts and had listened to the radio. The police had decided Shannon died of a heart attack. Only one paper mentioned the holes in his throat. The reporter explained it away by saying they had probably gotten there when Shannon fell. But the doctor's words were a strange litany, which went round and round in my brain: "I'd swear those marks were made by the teeth of a bat."

"The hell with it!" I said in disgust, and threw the bat to a corner of the room. "Let the cops worry their heads about it. It's none of my business."

Then I went to bed. But not to sleep. It seemed hours went by before I dozed off into a sleep filled with nightmares. First, I was being chased around the room by a demoniac-faced Shannon. He swung a huge black bat at me with murderous intent. And the bat glowed with a strange, unholy light. Then I dreamed I was swinging the baseball bat at a large flying *thing*. A *thing* with the face of Shannon. And every time I'd swing and miss, Shannon would break out into hideous laughter. I'd had pleasanter dreams in delirium!

THE work I had to do at the office kept me busy all that day. I had no time to think of Shannon, bats or anything else. But the moment I entered my room, it started all over again. Still I couldn't figure out the answer.

Sleep, strangely enough, came easily. No dreams; no nightmares. What it was that awakened me I don't know. I didn't hear anything. There wasn't that subconscious feeling of something or someone in the room. One second I was completely asleep, then I was completely awake.

There *was* someone in the room! I could hear him—or *it!* The light switch was next to my bed. I made no noise getting out of bed. Not even the rustle of a sheet.

The light went on—and Larry Adams turned a startled and frightened face from the closet door. His hand was on its knob. We faced each other across the few feet which separated us and looked silently at each other. Finally I said:

"What the hell's going on here? What are you looking for?"

His throat worked convulsively. He lifted a shaking hand to his face. He looked silly trying to brush his face with a flashlight. Then realizing he still held the flashlight, his hand tried to conceal it.

I said, "All right, you can calm down now. Sit down! Relax! And start talking! What are you doing here?"

He did as I ordered; sat down. To prove that he was calm, he took a cigarette from a leather case. I had to admit his hand was steady when he lit it but he kept tamping the end of the cigarette down, as though he was trying to drive it through the leather. He forgot one thing, though. To talk.

I reached over and picked up the telephone from its stand next to my bed.

"Give me Poli——"

He moved very fast then. His left hand closed over the mouthpiece and his right pushed me gently but firmly away from the phone.

"Take it easy, Jameson," he said. "I'll talk. You don't have to bluff me."

"So?"

"I came to get Shannon's bat."

"What bat? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I saw Corny pick it up at the park. And I saw the two of you talking. When I asked the kid where it was, he

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didn't know from zero. It wasn't hard to figure."

"So okay," I answered. "I've got it. But tell me, Adams, what makes you run the risk of burglary just to get hold of this bat?"

"This may sound funny to you," he began, then stopped abruptly.

"Okay. So make me laugh," I said.

His face went blank. It was as though he had remembered reading or hearing that if a face shows no emotion one can lie without fear of being caught.

"I'm a collector," he said. "Of bats. Some people collect stamps or coins. Well, I collect baseball bats. I've got original models from every star in the game."

"You mean you'd go so far as to steal? Take a chance on getting shot? Just to get this bat?"

"There've been cases of men committing murder for a coin!" he explained.

It sounded so reasonable, he almost had me believing him. Then he took his hand away from the telephone table. And where his palm had rested on the smooth wood, a large damp spot was to be seen. His face was blank, but his hand had given him away. He hadn't told me everything.

"All right, Adams," I said, "I believe you. But I'm keeping the bat!"

"You can't do that!" he said, his voice rising, "I mean— Oh hell! What good is that bat going to do you?"

SUDDENLY I was tired of fencing. I decided to put my cards on the table.

"Two'll get you ten," I said, "that there's a better reason than the one you just gave for breaking in my room."

He knew it was the payoff. And stopped acting.

"You win," he said. "But what's your angle? What do you know about the bat?"

"Nothing. That's why you're going to tell me things."

"Don't be simple," he said. "Think I'm foolish?"

"Keep talking that way," I said, "and I'll know it. Don't be a fool! Why do you think I went to the trouble I did? Because *I'm* a collector? Nuts! There's a story in that bat. And I'm going to get it. Now if you want to talk, okay. Maybe we can get together. If not, I'll write my own ticket."

"Tell you what I'll do, Jameson," he said. He was eager to co-operate now. "I'll make a deal with you. If you'll let me have the bat, I'll give you the lowdown."

"Get this, Adams," I said flatly. "There isn't going to be any deal. If I think you're telling the truth, I may —understand—*may* give you that bat. But I'm not promising anything."

"Okay. I'll string along. And remember, I was Shannon's room-mate. So what I'm going to tell is not hearsay. But before I begin, I want you to know that I wasn't lying about being a collector of baseball bats. When it comes to Shannon's club, though, there's more to it than just that. Jameson, I think Shannon's bat had—well—magic in it!"

I could feel my jaw drop. I had expected almost anything. But not that!

"Adams," I said, "I think you're goofy. Maybe from associating with Shannon too much."

"Yep," he said, smiling, "that's what I thought you'd say. Well, believe it or not, I've got to admit there were times when I thought I was goofy. But there's got to be an explanation. And that's the only one I can think of."

"It's a good beginning," I said. "Go on from there."

"By the way, where is the bat?"

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"I've got it. Safe and sound."

"Well bring it out. I want to show you something."

I looked at him for a second, wondering what he wanted. He didn't say anything more, just looked and waited. So I reached under the bed cover and pulled out the bat. He burst out into laughter, when he saw where I had hid it. I felt my face go hot in a flush.

"What's so funny?" I growled.

"You! Reminds me of that goon, Shannon. Sleeping with the bat in bed."

Again he burst into laughter. Then, sobering up, he said:

"Now take a good look at it."

"I've already done that," I began patiently to explain, "and I can't see anything strange or wrong with it, except that there is no manufacturer's name on it."

He shook his head slowly.

"The weight," he said.

"Huh?"

"Damn it, man! Haven't you ever picked up a baseball bat before? Can't you feel how light that bat is? It's even lighter than a fungo bat. Yet Shannon hit forty-four homers with it!"

I IMAGINED I looked as I felt—dumbfounded.

Adams continued:

"But that's only part of it. Shannon could hit any kind of a pitch with that bat. I don't care how high or low or close or wide it came in, he hit 'em. There must be some magic in it. So I figured if the bat worked for him, it should work for me, don't you see?"

"Uh huh," I said. "Tell me, where did Shannon get this bat?"

Adams shrugged his shoulders.

"Search me. He had it with him when he showed up that first afternoon at the park."

I had been holding the bat in my lap while we were talking.

"Look at it," I said, tossing it over to him, "see what else you find that's peculiar about it."

He twisted it about in his hands, then bent forward toward me.

"See," he said at last, "here's something I'd never had a chance to see before. This thing is a hand carved job. From the branch of a tree. What kind of a tree, I don't know. But I know it doesn't come from an ash or hickory. Too light!"

I deliberately switched him away from what he was talking about.

"You said you were his room-mate. And that you could tell me a couple of things about him. What?"

Adams looked at me in surprise.

"Say!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Why are you so interested in all that? Is there something screwy about the way he died? What's your angle?"

"No angle, fella," I explained. "I think there's a story in the man. That's my job, getting stories. Whatever you can tell that'll help, will make it so much easier to write."

He seemed satisfied with my explanation.

"Well, like I said before, I think he was crazy. Used to get up in the middle of the night and run around the room, swinging away with that bat like he was going to kill whatever he was chasing."

"And did you ever see what he was chasing."

"Be your age! There wasn't anything there. But hell, as far as Shannon was concerned, the room was full of them. Pink elephants or snakes or vampire bats or whatever he thought was there."

"Did he ever say what they were?"

"Nope. A couple of nights ago, I took the bat away from him. He was

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swinging so wild I thought he'd brain me. I thought the guy was going to blow his top. Jumped at me and clouted me on the chin and all the while he's swinging, he's hollerin': 'Give it to me before it's too late! It's here in the room with me.' Then he lets out an awful screech and yells, 'It bit me, the devil!' Then he grabs the bat and begins to swing again."

Adams shuddered.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Y'know," he confided in a low voice, "this sounds crazy, but when he was beating at the air in a corner of the room, it sounded like he was actually hitting something real. When he slugged me, he knocked me back on the bed. It took a minute or so to clear my head. And I could hear him pounding away at this something and all the while he's grunting and cursing. It made my hair stand on end. I figured he'd really gone off the deep end. So I ran over and grabbed him!"

HE STOPPED talking then. Sweat beaded his forehead. It wasn't a pleasant memory. But he had stopped at the wrong time. I felt he was going to tell me something important."

"Go on!" I commanded. "Spill it! What did you find in the corner?"

"Nothing," he said slowly, "not a damn thing. I dragged Shannon back to the bed. He flopped into it like he was exhausted. And fell asleep almost instantly. And do you know, he didn't remember a thing that happened when he awoke Thursday!"

"Thursday? Why that was the last day of the series!"

"That's right. This happened Wednesday night."

"Look, Adams," I said, "try to remember. What did you think he was hitting?"

"Did you ever hit a large rat with a club?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"Well, that's what it sounded like. That squashy sound, like soft bones breaking."

I had been sitting on the edge of the bed while all this was going on. When Adams stopped telling what had happened that night I twisted over and lay down.

None of what Adams had told made sense. But hell, there wasn't anything that made sense about the whole business. Still I could no more stop thinking about it than I could stop breathing. Adams must have asked several times before his words broke through the study I had fallen into.

"Hey, Jameson! What's the idea?"

"The idea?"

"Yeah, falling asleep that way. Well, come on—give. Do I get the bat?"

"Uh hunh. Yeah. But not for a little while. Got to do something first."

He tried arguing about it for several minutes. But I wouldn't agree. He left after I promised to give him the bat after I had done what I wanted.

My intentions were to leave New York the next morning. But the powers-that-be—my editors—ruled otherwise. They were going to break a story on how much hash could be had for cash; or, as I featured it: *A Restaurant Goes to the Black Market.*

What I thought was going to be a two-day chore, lasted two weeks. November was two days away before I got the week's leave I asked for. In the meantime I had gone through our files to see what else I could get on Shannon. Nothing else showed up except he had lived in the little village of Plainview, near Salem, just before he came to New York.

That was where I was bound for. Salem was twenty miles behind me and up ahead I could see the lights of

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Plainview. It wasn't much. A main street with two blocks of stores; a couple of theaters; a church, once white, now fading into a weather-worn gray, and the frame building which housed the *Plainview Herald.*

I EASED the car alongside the curbing in front of the *Herald,* and parked. Electric lights showed a white-haired old man sitting at a roll-top desk.

I walked in and a tinny bell heralded my entry. He didn't bother turning; just said: "Sit down, brother. Be with you in a minute."

I sat down as he suggested. It was the only chair in the office, and it was placed beside the large, old-fashioned desk. I had seen such small-town newspaper offices before, so I wasn't particularly interested in the lay-out. But the old guy at the desk interested me. He could have gone to Hollywood and gotten into the movies as a character actor. You know, the one who takes the part of the kindly, small-town newspaper editor. Even before he looked at me I knew his eyes would be blue, gentle and child-like.

He just sat there; not saying anything; waiting for me to open up. I introduced myself:

"My name is Jameson. Feature writer with the New York *Globe-World.* I've been assigned to do an article on Mort Shannon."

He smiled with his eyes and said: "I see. And of course you've come to Plainview for information."

"That's right, sir."

"So, being a newspaper man, you came to the most logical place as a source of information. Very well. What do you want to know?"

Fine! There wasn't going to be any beating around the bush here. This man knew!

"Thank you, sir," I said, "You see, I have the surface facts. Our files gave me those. But there are several questions I'd like answered."

He nodded his head as a signal for me to go ahead.

I ticked them off on my fingers:

"One, what did bats, I mean the flying mammals, have to do with Shannon; two, why did he call his baseball bat a 'hex' bat; three, was Shannon insane; and four, where did *this* come from?"

I had opened my topcoat as I went about listing the questions I wanted answered, and removed Shannon's black bat. I laid it on the desk.

He looked at it briefly, then said:

"It's Mort's bat, all right. I saw it take shape under his carving knife. Funny thing, I guess I was the only man he ever trusted. I suppose it was because I was the only one who ever tried to understand him. Anyway, there was one time my curiosity got the better of me. Asked him right out, where he got the wood. He grinned that funny, tight-lipped grin of his and said: 'Where d'ya suppose? On Gibbet Hill.' "

The old man's eyes were looking past me, looking at something in his memory which disturbed him. He went on, after a slight pause:

"But that was Mort Shannon. Close-mouthed, close-minded, and close-fisted. There were many here who thought he *was* crazy. They couldn't understand how a man could live all by himself, and not wanting anyone else, under the shadow of Gibbet Hill. Living on that run-down rock pile he called a farm. What they forgot was that Shannon was the last of a family who came over on the Mayflower. *That piece of sterile ground was holy to him!* And the day he came into the park carrying, as you and he called it, the 'hex' bat, the townspeople *knew* he was mad."

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He chuckled over the memory of the scene.

"Son," he went on, "did you know that Mort Shannon was forty years old?"

I shook my head in startled wonder.

"Yep, forty years old! And crazy about baseball. Always was. And never could play worth a darn! But this day, it was the morning of the Salem game, Mort comes in and goes out to the park. Hal Mayhew, the team manager, saw him coming and tried to keep him out. Not Mort he couldn't. Not that day! How he managed to get Hal to give him a try-out, I'll never know, but he did. I had the pleasure of seeing him play that afternoon against Salem. Knocked out six home-runs in six trips to the plate. Said his bat hexed the ball. Couldn't miss."

Again he chuckled. I digested everything he told me.

"Oh, yes," I said in reminder, "the flying bats?"

He looked at me speculatively.

"Lots of them on Gibbet Hill," he answered.

I AROSE, took the ball-bat from him and, slipping it under my coat again, started to leave. I became aware, then, of a low roaring sound. The old man had arisen too. He answered the question in my eyes.

"Storm blowing up from off the Cape. Be mighty windy—and scary, up there on Gibbet Hill."

There was something odd in the way he said it. As though he was warning me of something.

"I'm not afraid of storms—or bats," I said.

"No," he replied softly, "I didn't think you'd be."

I thanked him for his help and asked him how to get to the hill. He told me. Just as I opened the door, I thought of another question.

"Tell me, do people out here still believe in witchcraft?"

"Yes. Some of them. Shannon did. A couple of his ancestors were burned at the stake for being witches."

"What's that suppose to mean?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. Except that tonight is Hallo E'en—the witches' Sabbath. And there are people who swear they've seen them on Gibbet Hill."

I said, "Nuts," to that and walked out. Right into a wind that almost lifted me from my feet. It was a matter of a few yards to my car, but it seemed like a mile. It was bad enough in Salem, but when I hit the open road I thought the wind was going to lift the car right off the road.

I'd never heard such a fury of sound! It whistled and screeched through the canvas curtains of the convertible I drove, as though it were the voice of a thousand insane things. I could see trees whipping and straining about as though they were being shaken in some demoniac grip. Torn fragments of clouds scudded past a white-faced, frightened-looking moon.

It was a hilly, rock-strewn, barren country; all up and down hill, and a road which never stopped curving. And that mad wind chased me around the curves and down the hills with mad glee. Then suddenly, I was around a curve and Gibbet Hill was a quarter of a mile to my left.

It was exactly as the old man had described. A bald-topped hill with three trees, shaped like gallows, ornamenting its baldness. A hard-packed county road led to the hill.

I parked the car and got out. And wondered what was wrong. Then I knew. The silence! The wind had died and there wasn't the faintest sound to be heard. I looked up and saw that

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even the clouds had disappeared. The moon returned my look with cold indifference. I shivered unaccountably and wet suddenly dry lips. Up above, the trees beckoned with ghostly skeleton fingers.

There was no path, yet my feet found the way. I skirted rocks and gullies and never faltered in my ascent. At the top, the hill leveled off into a surprising flatness. Up ahead, ten yards or so, were the three trees. My heart was beating like a trip hammer as I approached them.

I pulled a searchlight from my topcoat pocket. I had brought the bat along and I examined the wood where it had been scraped. The grain showed through. It was such an unusual pattern that I was sure I would recognize it were I to see it.

I found what I was looking for on the second tree. The limb from which the baseball had been cut still showed the whiteness of its wound. I know I was grinning when I started back down the hill.

THE grin didn't last long though. I happened to look toward the moon just as I started back to the car. What I saw coming down across the moon's rays not only froze the grin, it petrified it!

Bats! At least a dozen of them. And all of them were headed straight for me. But such bats as I've never seen. The smallest of them had a wing spread of a couple of feet. The leader, or so I assumed, for he was in advance of the rest, was gigantic. It was as large as an eagle!

They swooped down around me, hissing and whistling eerily. I became conscious of the baseball club in my hand. Whirling about, I began a wild swinging with my club. My eyes almost popped out of my skull. The baseball bat was glowing with a strange, unearthly light. And those damned flying devils were afraid of it. For no sooner had I begun to swing, than they stopped coming for me. Instead, they formed a ring and began a cautious circling movement. The circle kept narrowing around me. Every now and then one of them would dart out at my head. But never within the gleaming arc of my bat.

A strange and terrible anger took hold of me. Yet it was an anger that had a mixture of fear in it. Words came tumbling from my mouth. Words which I had no consciousness of uttering. My ears heard them. Yet I knew not where they came from.

"Away, spawn of the Devil! Away, Succubi! Inccubi! Begone to that evil hell-hole from whence ye sprung!"

I had been retreating step by step down the slope of the hill. Now my feet felt gravel of the road. As though realizing I was about to escape them, the bats suddenly closed in from all sides. How I did it, I don't know, but a half dozen times I struck and found a soft furry body. They died, screeching horribly.

They retreated from my furious flailing and in the moment's respite they gave me, I reached my car. It didn't take more than a few seconds before I was on my way.

Once I glanced over my shoulder. What I saw made me press the accelerator clear to the floorboard. The leader, that gigantic caricature of a flying man, was a dozen feet behind me. An icy hand closed around my heart. I had seen something, in that fleeting look, which burned itself on my brain forever. That horrible *thing* had a human face! And I had recognized the face! It was Shannon's!

How long the ride took, I don't know. I only know I slid to a brake-burning

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stop before my apartment hotel. And I leaped from the car and ran through the lobby as though the devil was behind me. As far as I was concerned, he was!

I slammed my apartment door with a crash and leaned against it for a minute trying to recover my breath. I could feel my heart pounding madly. Then I realized that I was in the dark. And the memory of what had happened just a while before returned. I turned on every light in the joint!

"You need a good stiff shot, after that," I said to myself. And took my advice literally. I found out that my hand shook so I couldn't bring a glass to my mouth. I finally managed to down one. Then I relaxed.

The thought of that face, that monstrous horror, made my legs become rubbery. I had to sit down—but fast! My hand brushed against the arm of the easy chair into which I had ungracefully fallen.

The feel of the wood made me return again to a thinking being. For the past few hours I had been a creature of feelings. Now I was again Bill Jameson, the best feature man in the city and with the greatest story of my career right in my hands. That is, if I could tie up the loose ends.

So I started tying them up. And got to where I had started yelling at those flying monstrosities. Then the loose ends got all tied up in a knot of my own devising. For the thought had come to me:

Where did I get those words I'd used? How had they come to my mind? Yet, at the moment, they had seemed so familiar. As though I had said them once before. Long ago!

Suddenly I felt sleepy. I leaned back, closed my eyes—and was back on Gibbet Hill. Only it was afternoon. And long ago.

A LARGE crowd was gathered around three newly erected gallows. Two wretches, gowned in black, hatless, and already wearing the look which death grants, stood in front of me. Another — short, stocky, broad-shouldered—stood with the two. But there was no fear in his face. Neither of me nor of death.

My voice boomed out into the still air:

"Lemuel Proctor! Richard Corker! Mortimer Shannon! It is the judges' decision that ye have been found guilty of consorting with witches. Aye, that ye had been seen taking part in their unholy rites. Ye have been given the chance to recant, to confess, to cast out the Devil from thy souls! But the Devil hath taken too strong a hold upon thy souls. There is but one decision for me to make. Therefore, I, William Jameson, do, in this, the Sixteen Hundred and Sixtieth Year of our Lord, commit ye to be purged of thy evil, by means of fire. And may God have mercy on thy souls!"

A great sigh rose from the crowds, like a sorrowful wind rustling the leaves of the birches on the slopes of the hill. It was what they had been waiting for. My decision. And now the gallows would feel the soft, yielding weight of human flesh. Roasting flesh!

The two miserable wretches flanking Shannon sank to their knees. But not he! He faced me with that same stony, proud look. Now he spoke:

"Think not, Master Jameson, that this be the end of the tale. For thou hath a son. And the fruit which must soon roast on yonder gibbet shall be eaten by ye! Yea! *By thee and thy son and thy son's sons . . . throughout eternity!*"

I OPENED my eyes. Closed them. And immediately opened them

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again. I had fallen asleep and dreamed a strange dream. But when I had fallen asleep, the lights had been on! Now the room was dark. The darkness was like a soft mantle, a mantle of evil, wrapped around me.

Silence! Deep, impenetrable silence! Of the tomb. No—worse! For this silence had an odor, an aura of such evil, such horror, as I had never believed could exist.

I became aware of an eerie glow. A firefly-like shedding of light. I could see it from the corner of my eyes. It was the baseball bat! And I knew then, although no sound broke the stillness of the room, that I was no longer alone.

Somewhere in this room was a *Being*. A *Being* with great leather-like wings, a furry body—and with the face of Mort Shannon. Slowly my fingers closed around the bat handle. Gently I lifted it to a ready position. I gathered my legs closer to the chair in anticipation of the moment when Shannon would strike. Nor had I long to wait.

There was a great flapping of wings and *it* was on me. But I was faster. I had rocketed from the chair at *its* first movements. My hand flicked the light switch. Nothing happened. A great, flying shape loomed before my staring eyes.

I swung the bat hard. It struck something solid. And what it struck shrieked once, as though the wood was something which had seared *it* to *its* soul.

I stood, back against the wall, every nerve and muscle in my body tense and trembling in anticipation. And this time *it* struck first! From a direction I hadn't anticipated. From above and to one side. A disgusting odor, foul, fetid and evil-smelling filled my nostrils. *Its* body had pressed against mine for an instant. And tiny teeth had met in my throat!

I know I screamed once . . . and then again! Then I was beating at something on the floor. Something soft and furry, like a large rat. Laughter, harsh and horrible, welled from my throat as I beat at the thing on the floor. Then there was a splintering sound! And I knew no more.

I opened my eyes and looked into the darkness about me. I stood up and every bone in my body protested at my rising. I walked over to where the light switch was located. This time the lights came on. I looked down to where the *thing* should have been lying. *There was nothing there except the handle of the baseball bat!*

I walked into the bathroom. As I dabbed iodine into the two small perforations in the side of my throat, words formed across the gleaming surface of the mirror:

"And thy son's sons . . . throughout eternity!"

THE END

DRINKING SEA WATER

ONE of the greatest dangers to the torpedoed sailor is that his drinking water will be exhausted. But according to Dr. Alex Goetz of the California Institute of Technology this problem is now under control. He has perfected a chemical which will make sea water drinkable and allow the sailors to have water for as many as twenty-five days. The process and chemicals are a closely guarded military secret, but they are described as being a combination of colloidal materials.

In purifying the sea water, one must use two containers; sea water is poured into one container and the chemical is added to precipitate the harmful ingredients out of the sea water. The chemical is allowed to work for two hours and then the water is poured into the second container while the precipitate is thrown away. The water is purified once more and then is fit to drink.

Now the old saying of "water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink" is changed to "plenty of water, men, let's make it fit to drink."

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SCIENTIFIC ODDITIES

By LYNN STANDISH

UP UNTIL very recently, all the mahogany used in this country came from Africa. The wood is especially desirable for the manufacture of motor boats, fine pianos, fine furniture and the building of homes.

About twelve years ago the subtropical experiment station of the University of Florida made some plantings of mahogany trees imported from Rhodesia. In this short time, the trees have grown almost as tall as the native trees twenty-five years old, have trunks with twice the diameter, and form wood four times as fast. In these twelve years, the trees have grown to a height of 40 feet and have eight-inch trunks. These trees are true natives of the tropics but have been found hardy enough to withstand the cold, including one cold snap where the temperature was 27° F. Another example of their hardiness is that none of the local insects or diseases have hurt their growth.

AT THE Department of Agriculture's Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland, hens lay colored eggs, bees have better dispositions and new types of birds, beasts and bugs are built to order.

Apple growers have always been up against a dilemma, if the fruit is allowed to ripen well, much of it drops, if it is picked earlier, the coloring is unattractive. Poorly colored apples bring poor prices but fallen apples aren't salable at all. However a mixture of only half a teaspoonful of hormones to 100 gallons of water, sprayed on apple trees just as the fruit is ready to drop, will keep it on the branches for another two weeks. If this treatment is repeated at regular intervals, the apples will never fall.

The Beltsville men after years of crossing and recrossing, turned out a streamlined turkey, nearly all white meat. It can fix up a chicken with almost all white meat, or all dark.

Beekeepers demanded a new model with a longer proboscis, to dig deeper into the big flowers and get more nectar. Beltsville men are still working on the problem. They want a bee with a gentle disposition, a love of home, ability to fly in cold weather, extra storage space for honey, and some distinguishing characteristics which will make it possible to tell the new bee from the old.

When vegetable oil began to replace lard, and farmers realized that their pigs were turning out fat that nobody wanted, Beltsville got started on remodeling the hog. The new porker's weight is transferred to bacon and hams—plus a few other innovations—which makes him a superhog. The Danish Landrace hog is one of the best meat-producing hogs in the world, but it has a weak back, weak feet, and a white complexion which would be subject to sunburn in hog raising areas. Now, after several generations, the main characteristics of the new hog are a strong, arched back, laden with pork chops, and roasts; and the Landrace's long, streamlined body and thick legs that are heavy with bacon and hams. The new hog will be red, able to stand the summer sun of Kansas or Florida.

New models don't just grow. There must be research behind them—at Beltsville where life is made to order.

EVERY day we read about a new shortage of a vital material brought on by the war. Europe, which was once a great source of supply, is now cut off from us and America must stand on her own two feet, but we are meeting challenge on every front.

Before the war we imported on an average of 3,000,000 pounds of goose down annually from Europe. Today we need an even greater supply to make jackets for our aviators, pillows for our hospitals, pillows for the men of the armed forces, and yet our supply from overseas has dwindled to a mere 1,000,000 pounds each year.

Now news comes that Dr. John I. Hardy of the U. S. Department of Agriculture has discovered a process whereby feathers can be "minced" so that they can be used.

The feathers are first dried and cleaned and then put into a special mill that breaks the barbs away from the midribs and at the same time cuts them into pieces. These barbs contain countless tiny hooks which tangle with other barbs to form a huge "blanket." The entire mixture is then subjected to an up-draft which sends the lighter barbs into a large container while the heavier midribs are permitted to settle and are then removed.

According to Dr. Hardy, his process will not entirely replace our need for goosedown, but will produce a product that can be mixed with the down to make our limited supply go farther.

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I'LL BE SEEING YOU

By Lester Barclay

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

Patrons of the Marvel Inn saw the face of lovely Nita only as a reflection. Which, as matters turned out, was very fortunate for them

WABASH AVENUE, where it is sandwiched in by the river and the Loop and the Gold Coast, is a street of tawdry night clubs and tawdrier boarding houses.

The Marvel Inn, Wally La Rue's place, was a tinsel affair of the same sort which was usual on the street. A gaudy red neon sign invited the passer-by. A glass-enclosed case displayed the members, past, present, and future, of the floor show to be found within the doors of the Marvel Inn. The one thing which gave it an air of distinction, and which none of the other clubs possessed, was a doorman. Dressed in a second-hand uniform, purchased by Wally in one of his lighter-headed moments from one of the larger hotels, the doorman paraded back and forth across the sidewalk fronting the club.

If it weren't for the doorman, Jerry Shaw would have kept on walking. But the sight of that resplendent uniform made him slow down, then stop completely.

A whistle of awe escaped Jerry's lips.

"Holy sacred cats," he whispered aloud, "has the circus come to Wabash Avenue?"

The doorman's eyes were pools of white in his black face as he watched Jerry slowly circle him. Jerry inspected the gaudy uniform from every angle; then, after poking a speculative finger into the doorman's anatomy, said to nobody in particular:

"Well, it's real; that's certain."

Then, to the doorman:

"What's the idea? Something new in advertising?"

"Yes, sir," the colored man said proudly, when he saw that Jerry was not crazy. "Boss said the joint needs class. So he buys me this. Man," he sighed sorrowfully, "wisht I could wear this on Thirty-fit' Street. Sure make the gals stop swishin' by."

Jerry's eyes crinkled at the corners in silent laughter as he moved up to inspect the display of the night-club's wares. But the eyes turned serious at the sight of a billboard mounted on a tripod affair and set beside the door of the club.

The billboard merely announced that a certain "Nita, Danseuse Exotique" was to be found nightly at the Marvel Inn, in her specialty number. The words on the sign meant nothing to Jerry, but the picture of the woman known as Nita was what made him turn serious.

Not that pictures of beautiful women were such a rarity in his life. As a matter of fact, Jerry Shaw made his money through women. Beautiful, plain or just dowdy, so long as they had talent,

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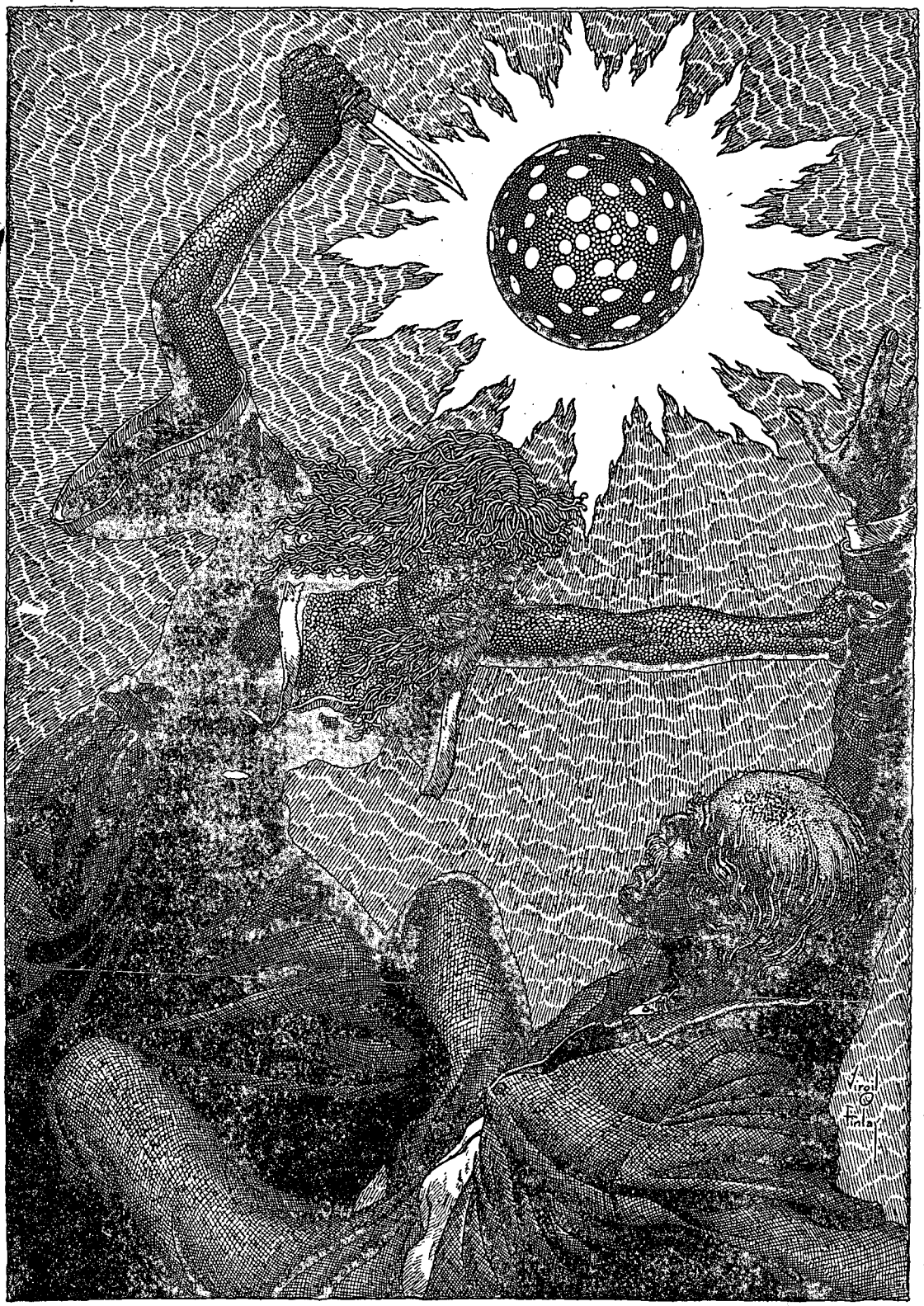

Screaming hoarsely, old Max fell back before the fury of her attack

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Jerry was interested in them. For he was the press agent of the show world. And many of the stars of radio, cafe and screen owed their careers to his super-selling of their abilities.

For a long moment he inspected the picture; then, making up his mind, he pushed open the door of the club and walked in.

A THIRTY-FOOT bar alongside one wall, fifteen tables bordering a small, square dance floor, and an atmosphere of gloom: that was the Marvel Inn.

Jerry was undecided whether to sit at the bar and have the shirt-sleeved, cigar smoking bartender serve him, or to sit at a table and have the fancy painted waitress clip him for a fast whiskey. The dice board in a corner made up his mind. That and the fact he knew the floor show wouldn't come on for another fifteen minutes.

"Fives and sixes, for a half each," he told the "26" girl.

The look of boredom remained on her hard face as she started to mark her sheet.

He spent fifteen minutes and four dollars in a vain attempt to win at least a dollar's worth of drinks. It was with a feeling bordering regret that he heard the leader of the five-piece band announce the opening number.

He knew what to expect in a joint like this: An M.C. who was a flip drip with a fast quip; half a dozen "paraders" who did a walk-on and a takeoff—with clothes; and one or two who tried to sing or dance, sandwiched in among the strippers. And if that wasn't bad enough, the master of ceremonies, that imitation of an imitation of Bob Hope, gave out with the corniest jokes ever heard.

He was ready to give the whole thing up in disgust, when the jerk on the floor held up his hands in a dramatic gesture and announced:

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the high spot of our show. Nita!"

At the sound of clapping hands and whistling which broke out at the announcement, Jerry looked around. The joint had been empty when he had come in. But now the tables and bar had a full complement of customers.

The master of ceremonies, after waiting for the applause to die down, went on:

"And now what d'ya say about giving a hand to the genial jerk, the guy who owes me two-weeks' salary, your host and friend—Wally La Rue!"

A slick, black-haired man in a dark business suit, seated at the far side of the bar, nodded his smiling face to the good-natured applause which greeted the M.C.'s sally.

But Jerry was more interested in what came out on the floor. It was the girl of the picture. He felt that familiar warmth at the pit of his stomach, which told him he was about to witness something memorable. That feeling—he called it money feeling—was a sort of sixth sense, which unfailingly foretold new discoveries.

He sighed in relief and pleasure. She was worth the wait.

A single spotlight picked up her entrance and followed her to the center of the floor. The band was doing its best to kill her song, "The Mooch," but nothing could detract from the beauty of her face and figure.

Jerry watched her thoughtfully, his brain already busy with plans for her future. She was dressed in a close-fitting, black gown, with a full skirt that swished around her long limbs as she went through the movements of her dance. Or, rather, of her walk. Because it wasn't a dance at all. She walked slowly about the floor, pirouet-

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ting and making small circular movements. And Jerry became conscious that he wasn't watching her walk. His eyes were on the large, highly polished brass plate which she carried. About two feet in diameter, its shining surface reflected brilliantly the spotlight glare. And Jerry realized, then, the cleverness of her act. For, somehow, she contrived never to show her face to the audience. They could see it reflected in the mirror-like surface of the plate she carried.

"You've got it baby," he reflected, nodding his head soberly, "and all you need is a build-up. I can give you that. If you'll only let me handle you."

SHE was the last number on the floor show. Jerry watched her go to the rear of the tavern. Evidently the dressing quarters for the girls.

Hurriedly he dropped a bill on the table and set off after her. He was just in time to see her disappear into a room.

His first knock on the door brought only silence. The second brought results, but not what he expected.

The door opened enough to let a head through. The head looked up at the startled press agent and said:

"Miss Nita ain't seein' nobody. So beat it, bud."

The head started to return even while Jerry yelped:

"Hey! Wait a minute! I just want to see this Miss Nita on business."

The head stopped its withdrawal.

"Monkey business, I suppose," it said.

Jerry found himself going hot with anger. Who the hell was this head that it could talk to him this way? But not knowing what reason the head had for being in the room with the girl, he tried to contain his anger. They looked at each other in silent dislike for a few moments. The more Jerry looked at the head, the less he liked it.

First, he didn't like yellow, parchment-like skin. Particularly when it had an accompanying fringe of uncut hair the color and texture of dead seaweed. Secondly, he didn't like rheumy eyes, red-veined and mad-looking; and last, he just didn't like the whole damned head! Nor did he like the skinny body to which the head was attached.

He advanced on the old coot blocking the doorway, saying menacingly:

"Get out of my way, rum-pot, before you get hurt. I got business with the lady."

Strangely enough, the old man stood his ground. Suddenly a fury burst out of the door. It was Nita herself. She twisted the old man about, as she yelped:

"Say! Who gave you the right to play guardian, Max? I'll see whoever I want to see. And I won't ask you about it. Now get back inside and finish your work."

Jerry had the strangest feeling that the look the old man sent at Nita was one of hate. But without any further talk he went back into the room. Nita, all smiles now, said:

"It was a good thing I heard him. Sometimes he steps out of line and makes a nuisance of himself. I'm sorry that happened."

"Oh," Jerry said easily, "that's quite all right. Really couldn't blame the old boy, at that. I imagine there are any number of wolves plying their trade around here."

One eyebrow went up in a quizzical manner as she asked:

"But we're not going to spend the rest of the night out here, are we? Come inside and tell me what's on your mind."

Jerry followed her in and breathed a sigh of relief. Being neat himself, he disliked the general disorder and un-

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kempt appearance of the usual theatrical dressing room. But a single glance told him she possessed the virtues of cleanliness and order. Everything had a place. Her open wardrobe closet was immaculate with its neatly hung gowns. And the small vanity she used as a dresser had an almost military air in its orderly array of makeup aids.

Nita noticed his searching glance.

"Like it, Mr.—uh——" she hesitated.

"Shaw," he helped her, "Jerry Shaw. Yes," he admitted, "I do like it."

"Well, that's settled, Mr. Shaw." She smiled mischievously. "And now we can talk about the weather, or was there something else on your mind?"

SHE pulled up a chair for him. She seated herself at the vanity and was removing her makeup, while he sat to one side watching her. From the corner of his eye he saw something move. He turned his head and saw Max, seated on a stool in a far corner of the room, busily engaged in polishing the brass plate. Jerry realized that the personality of the girl he was watching was so intense that he hadn't even noticed the old man.

He returned his gaze to her and found her eyes intent on his.

"Look, Mr. Shaw." She was suddenly serious. "Suppose you tell me what it is that you want. I like mystery. But only between the covers of a book."

"I'm sorry," he said contritely and smiled disarmingly. Jerry Shaw possessed that blessed personality of boyish charm and virile maleness which all women liked.

"I didn't realize just how mysteriously I was acting," he apologized. "Almost like a character in an English movie. But really, my mission and desires are rather ordinary. You see," he explained, "I'm a press agent. And what I want to talk to you about is a little matter of—er—money."

Her brow suddenly held little lines of concentration and one lip was held prisoner between her white even teeth. She was trying to remember something. Suddenly it came to her and her eyes went wide in startled wonder.

"Jerry Shaw!" She breathed his name almost ecstatically. "Not *the* Shaw who made Yolande, and Belle Harris and——"

He felt his face go red in embarrassment as he broke in with:

"Uh—yes, in a way. But the truth of the matter is they had the stuff on the ball to begin with. Just as you have. All I did was start the ball rolling in the right direction. And that's what I want to talk to you about. You see, Miss Nita, you've got that quality too. That certain something called audience appeal. And with the build-up I have in mind for you, why you'll be the hit of the town in a month or two. And from then on—who knows——"

She took a long breath at the visions his words had produced.

"You mean," she said slowly, unbelievingly, "you—want to handle me?"

He nodded his head.

Her smile was answer enough.

"Well, that's settled then," he said, getting up. "Now I'll see the owner of this place about some billing I'd like to have him make up and I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?" she asked, disappointment in her voice.

"H'm, let's see," he said. "Perhaps I can give you a few moments in the afternoon. Shall we say from one to five? I hate these hour lunches."

He didn't realize that his eyes held a plea. But she saw that look and gave the right answer.

"If that's what my press agent wants, a four hour lunch, who am I to say no. But remember," she warned, "this body

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beautiful can't take too many calories."

THE glow of happiness remained in her eyes for several minutes after he left. Remained until a hoarsely vicious voice brought her back to reality. It was the voice of the old man in the corner. He had stopped his polishing and was eyeing her in disgust. The yellowish tipped ends of his ragged mustache were like a filthy strainer through which came his words of vituperation.

"I seen it! The way he looked at you. Like you was somethin' holy. But he don't know. Does he? Only old Max knows. Old Max and you—you ——" His voice began to rise.

She walked up to him and bounced her hand across his face several times.

"Shut up, you old fool;" she said in a voice cold and brittle with anger. "You don't know what you're talking about. And if you don't stop that crazy talk of yours, I'll have Wally throw you out so hard you'll come apart at the seams."

He squealed in laughter when she slapped him. His eyes seemed to lose themselves behind the hairless walls of his eyelids.

"Hee-hee—" his voice, suddenly thin and high, set her teeth on edge "—hee-yah! Old Max knows," he squealed, rocking back and forth on his stool.

"Nothing! Do you hear? You know nothing," she whispered. Her body was trembling, so great was her anger. Her eyes, bluer than the blue of the sea, were almost black with fury and her shoulder length blonde hair, whipped and stormed across her face, as she shook and slapped him again and again.

As quickly as her anger was born, so quickly did it die. For suddenly she stopped pummeling him and said softly, her lips parted in an almost gentle smile:

"I'm afraid, Max, that I'll have to let you go. I've warned you before about minding your own business. So after the last show tonight, I'll have Wally pay you off."

It was strange, the terror which came to his face at her words.

"No, Miss Nita, please," he bleated, as though she had threatened him with death, "don't fire me. I'm just an old man. Just old Max—" he began to cry "—and if you fire me, where'll I go? How'll I——"

"Shut up then! And mind your own business," she said. "The way you carry on, one would think you owned this joint instead of being the porter."

"Oh, thank you," he whimpered, as he went back to polishing the plate. "And pretty soon now you'll thank me. I think I got the right stuff in that oil I was tellin' you about."

"Yes," she reminded him, "and that's another thing. Forget about making my hair more beautiful than it is. I'm satisfied with the way it looks. So don't go giving me anything to improve it."

Her anger spent at last, she put on a skirt and blouse and went out front to tell La Rue about her good fortune. So it was she didn't hear the old man whisper slyly:

"Oh, but what I have for you will make your hair the most beautiful in the world. People will think it's alive."

LA RUE was still sitting at the end of the bar. Nita sat beside him and ordered a coke. He looked at her, not saying anything for a moment; then, his voice sour with suspicion, he said:

"I don't like it."

"Don't like what, Wally?" she asked.

"This guy Shaw's proposition. Too risky. Too much money involved."

She looked into his little black shoe-button eyes. There was an undertone

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of derision in her voice as she said:

"What's the matter, big shot? Afraid?"

"I ain't afraid of nothing," he replied.

"Except spending money," she taunted.

He defended himself. "I got an investment here, Nita. I can't risk what Shaw wants. It'll cost a couple a grand to redecorate and I'll have to close for a week. Besides, how do I know you'll click, like he thinks?"

But she knew how to win him over.

"Listen, Wally," she reminded him, "remember Johnson's spot? And Belle Harris? Well, what do you think happened there? A miracle? No! Shaw came along, saw her and within two weeks Johnson had to call out the cops to chase the people away."

"H'm," he mused. "You're right about that, Nita. O.K. If that's the way it goes, I'll ride along."

"You won't be sorry," she promised as she slid off the stool and started back to her dressing room.

Max was admiring the result of his labor when she walked in.

"Well, Max," she approved, "there's one thing you can do, all right—polish that plate like no one else can."

He cackled in appreciation. Thrusting the plate out to her he said:

"Here, Miss Nita, take a look in it."

She took the plate from him and holding it before her, as she had done on the club floor, she began to move about the small room in stately measures.

Stopping before him, at last, she looked long into its bright surface. Looked until a glazed film began to spread over her eyes, until curious little lines began to appear at the corners of her mouth, until the veins at the sides of her temples began to beat, until Max's dirty, skinny hand began to stroke her gleaming yellow-gold hair.

A terrified moan sounded from deep in her throat as she turned on the old man. She had been so lost in her reflection that she hadn't noticed him slide around till he was behind her.

"No, Max! No!" she moaned.

There was a mad laughter behind the wet veil of his eyes.

"Your hair," he whispered, trying to stroke it, even as she whirled from him, "so pretty — now. Just let me touch it once."

Gone was the anger—the power over him, which she had held a half hour before. Now it was a young and very frightened woman who retreated in slow, hypnotized steps before his advance.

"What the hell's going on here?" a hard brittle voice demanded.

NITA'S scared eyes and the mad ones of the old man turned to find Wally La Rue standing in the open doorway.

Nita's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

Max seemed paralyzed at what he saw in La Rue's face.

A half dozen steps and La Rue was beside Max. Too fast for the old man to stop, the night-club owner sent his fist crashing into his face. And before the old man sank to the floor in unconsciousness, La Rue struck again.

Nita found her voice then.

"Please, Wally," she begged, holding hard to his arm, "don't hit him again. The old man didn't know what he was doing."

He turned savagely on her.

"What do you mean? Doesn't know what he's doing. This isn't the first time he's done that. And it isn't the first time you found excuses for him."

"Yes yes, I know," she said, her

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voice pleading with him, "but forget about it. This one time anyway. I know how to handle him."

"Yeah. You know how to handle him," La Rue said, as he started to leave. "Just don't forget—I'm investing money in you. So watch his step."

He paused in the doorway for a second. "I just came in to tell you that I'm going to do what Shaw suggests," he said, and walked out.

Even as La Rue closed the door, Nita had soaked a wash cloth under the cold water tap of the small bowl in her room, and began to apply it to the old man's face. Blood had made a red mask of the greyish yellow mustache. The blue-veined eyelids, closed tightly against the old man's eyes, gave to his features a look of death.

She had to apply several cold packs to his face, before the fluttering lids told of returning consciousness. Fascinated, she watched his eyes swing about the room and finally come to rest again on her face. The thin bloodless lips parted in a smile.

"I know you," he whispered. "You're——"

JERRY Shaw lifted the phone from its cradle.

"Yes? Speaking. Who? Nita? Of course. I'll be there—in the second booth past the bar." He listened to the voice at the other end and felt his fingers tingle against the coolness of the instrument. "In about ten minutes," he said, and hung up.

He looked at the now silent phone and shook his head in slow wonderment.

"Hey," he cautioned his reflection in the mirror on the wall, "take it easy. She's just business with you. So don't sound as though you've got a date with an angel."

He took a last look in the mirror before leaving, grinned slyly and said, "Or have you?" and closed the door gently.

He found her instantly, in the second booth off the bar. The gay peasant print dress she wore gave her an air of charming youth. And her pale skin, heightened only by the color of her lipstick, made a lovely picture in the frame of her beautiful golden hair.

In the few seconds it took to get to her booth, his mind flashed quickly over the past three days. It was incredible! The difference between the girl he had seen on the dance floor and the one who had come to have lunch with him the following day. Incredible and somehow annoying. He had seen her again the night following their first lunch. And the impression he had gotten when he first saw her, became a disturbing thought in his mind:

"It's as though you are two people. One, a face to be seen reflected in a polished brass plate, beautiful with a beauty not of this world. Yet you wear that beauty as though it were a mask. Behind it is something horrible, something almost—obscene."

She saw the puckered frown in his forehead as he sat down.

"Something wrong, Jerry?" she asked, touching his arm lightly with the tips of her fingers.

Even as he smilingly reassured her, his thoughts went on:

"And the other person is you, sitting here as you are now. Beautiful still, with an unearthly beauty, but no longer wearing that mask. With the beauty of a child, innocent, clean and sweet."

He could not quite stop the shudder which came to him.

"Jerry! What's wrong?" She was alarmed.

"Nothing, honey; nothing. Just that I get that goose-fleshy feeling when I

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see you," he said.

Her eyes went darkly purple and a faint flush appeared in the smooth pallor of her skin.

"Jerry," she said, her eyes becoming intent on the pattern of the table cloth, "I have never known anyone quite like you."

"Compliments, honey?" he teased.

"No. The truth. You are the most wonderful person in your kindness—your consideration—the patience you have with me. And what you are doing for me is something so fine that there are no words for it. But I want you to stop doing it."

Her eyes returned to their study of the table cover.

He felt his jaw go slack and a film of perspiration form on his forehead.

"Wha-what do you mean—stop doing it?" he said.

She didn't answer.

"Now wait a minute, honey," he went on, trying to break through the wall of silence she had erected against him. "You're not playing fair. Hell, I don't mean that. But this—this——" he stopped as though suddenly he understood what had brought on her outburst.

"So that's it!" he almost shouted as he fiercely took hold of one of her hands. "You see me come in here with a frown on my puss and a double-talk answer to your question and you jump to a conclusion. And of course it's a wrong one."

He laughed aloud and went on: "I suppose you thought, from my look that I was fed up with the whole business and——" His voice trailed off. Her eyes were still lowered. Only her face showed strain. But now a chink appeared in the wall of her silence. And through it, she sent an arrow that pierced him.

"No, Jerry. That isn't it. It's just that I have a fear something is going to happen, something—horrible."

The chink closed again. She got up as he started to talk again. His hand held tightly to hers, compelling her to remain as he said:

"I don't know what's wrong. But whatever it is, I'm seeing it through. Because——"

Suddenly he knew what he was going to say. This terror which seemed to hold her in its grip—this nameless fear he felt whenever she spoke—all this made him realize what he felt. And so he said it simply and without drama: "I love you, Nita."

Their eyes held for a long moment then suddenly she stooped and kissed him. His hand released her, and as she left, she whispered over her shoulder:

"And I love you, dearest."

HIS secretary looked wonderingly at him as he passed her without his usually cheery greeting. There was a strange tightness to his usually pleasant features. And a stoniness in his eyes that boded ill for someone.

He sat for the rest of the afternoon in a forbidding and introspective silence. Nor could his secretary break into that silence. Not even with the announcements that some of his most important clients were waiting to see him.

"Tell 'em," he growled at her, "to come back tomorrow, or next week, or next year. I don't want to see anybody, understand?"

And at her solicitous, "What's wrong, Mr. Shaw? Are you ill?" he grunted, "No. I'm all right. Just leave me alone."

All that afternoon he puzzled over the riddle which Nita had presented to him at lunch. But there were too many pieces missing. And what did she mean by: "Something is going to happen—

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something horrible."

It was a thoughtful and sober-faced Jerry who came to the Marvel Inn that night.

La Rue had gone all out in the way of redecoration. On Jerry's suggestion, La Rue had gone in for an impressionistic interior. A curved bar did a sinuous, serpentine figure along one wall. He had deepened the interior by knocking out the false back and using the storage space behind. Where there had been fifteen or twenty tables before, there was room now for fifty or more.

But Jerry noticed this only subconsciously.

He passed La Rue without seeing him, but the night club owner grabbed him as was walking by and forced him into a chair.

"Well, Shaw," La Rue said, "how does it look? Starting to look all right, huh?"

Jerry nodded, almost indifferently. Then a new thought came to him. Perhaps La Rue know some of the answers to the puzzle.

"Look, Wally," Jerry asked, "have you noticed anything wrong with Nita these last few days?"

La Rue rolled the cigar, which he never seemed to be without, around in his mouth. Then he took it out and became absorbed in its shape. Finally he said:

"Why?"

"I don't know. But today at lunch she seemed upset about something."

"Only one thing'd upset her," La Rue observed.

"What's that?"

"Max."

"Max?" Jerry exclaimed angrily. "Who the hell is this Max? And what can he do to upset her so?"

La Rue lost interest in the cigar. He looked intently at Jerry and said:

"Don't know who or what he is. I only know that when I want to get rid of him, she says she'll go too. Funny thing about that. He seems to hate her. And she him. Man, I've seen her slap him silly. And he just laughs." He sighed at the wonder of it all.

"Yep," he concluded, "sometimes I think they're *both* nuts."

"Shut up!" Jerry suddenly snarled.

"Huh?"

"I said shut up! I don't want to hear anything more about her."

La Rue looked at the now white-faced Jerry and got up from his chair, saying:

"Look, brother, you asked me something. And I told you. Take it or leave it."

He turned and without another word walked away.

JERRY sat there until he regained control of himself. Then he went back to Nita's dressing room.

She opened the door to his knock and at the obvious look of love which came to her eyes at sight of him, all his fears and doubts vanished.

"C'mon in, honey," she said as she took hold of his arm, "I was just getting ready for rehearsal."

He straddled a chair, resting his arms across the back.

She was wearing a ballet outfit and her long, slender legs were perfect in their symmetry.

"I'm almost tempted to have you go on in that outfit," he grinned at her.

Before she could reply, Max came in.

"Evenin', Miss Nita," he grunted, as he walked back to his stool in the far corner and set about his never ending task of polishing the brass plate. He didn't even look at Jerry.

The sight of the old man brought back La Rue's monologue. Unconsciously Jerry began to think back to the first night he had come to this dressing room. And how she had

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stormed at the old man. And remembered, too, the look the old man had sent to her, as he went into the room. A look of hate. Yes, and of fear, too.

Nita had been chattering away, all the while he had been thinking. She had been busy at her wardrope trunk, her back to him. Now she turned and faced him. And as she looked at him, her face was wiped clean of all expression. It became a blank mask, through which her eyes peered, almost menacingly.

Her voice, flat and thin, came to him:

"What are you doing with that in your hand?"

He looked questioningly at her. Then looked down at his hands. And saw that in his abstraction he had picked up something from her dressing table. It was a life size, stone statuette of a small bird. He could see how the sculptor had produced, in perfect detail, the swelling of the tiny throat as it sang.

"This?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I don't know. Must have picked it up when I sat down. Why? Something wrong with it?"

"There's nothing wrong with it," she said in that same toneless voice. "Just put it back, that's all."

"Oh, sure," he replied, returning it to its place on the vanity. Then he felt it. The room had suddenly an overpowering air of menace, fear, horror. He felt the hair at the back of his neck stiffen at his feeling. And as he returned the statuette to its resting place, the mask she seemed to have put on came apart and the familiar face he knew and loved looked down at him.

"Oh, honey!" She came over to him. and placed her arm around his shoulders. "I'm sorry I jumped at you that way, but I was so afraid you'd drop it."

His head jerked up to look at her.

"You were *afraid* I'd drop it? Why? Is it so important to you?"

MAX laughed softly in his corner at Jerry's question.

"What's he laughing at?" Jerry asked.

"Who knows what he laughs at?" she countered.

And from the corner came the answer.

"Max knows."

She read the puzzlement in Jerry's face.

"Wait, honey," she said, "don't ask any more questions. When the time comes, I'll tell you everything."

"I'd rather ask now," he persisted.

"Don't, Jerry," she said. "I won't answer them."

"Listen to me now," he said in a quiet but commanding voice. "This afternoon you said something which is still bothering me. What is this thing you fear? I want to know—so I can fight it with you."

And again that cackle of laughter from Max in his corner.

Jerry's reserve broke at that. White-faced with anger he stood up.

"Tell me," he demanded, "who is this Max? What is he to you and why——"

"Better go, Jerry," she said, turning her face from him.

"If that's your answer, I'll go," he snarled, and left.

She sat staring at the blank-faced door for a long time after he left.

"It was better so," a voice said.

She turned and found Max standing beside her. There was a world of weariness in her voice, as she said:

"Bring me that plate, Max."

LA RUE, a worried frown on his sharp features, stopped Jerry on his way out.

"Hey, fella, you're not mad, are you?"

Jerry knew what was behind the

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question: La Rue's fear that Shaw would walk out on him, leaving him holding the bag.

"No," Jerry told him, "and don't worry. I get hot once in a while, but I won't walk out on you. Just have the joint ready for the opening."

La Rue's sigh of relief brought a smile to Jerry's lips.

"It'll be ready," the night club owner assured him.

Jerry called Nita the next day. He had gone over the whole thing in his mind. And arrived at a single conclusion. That he'd wait for her to answer his questions—whenever she decided to.

"Look, Nita," he said when she answered, "let's forget last night, shall we?"

Her voice came clearly and heart-warmingly over the wire:

"Of course, dear. Besides, all I can think of now is the opening tomorrow night."

"Well, don't worry about that. Everything is set."

"Oh, that's grand. Will I see you tonight?"

"No, dear. There are certain last minute details I have to take care of. But I'll be down early enough, before you go on, and we'll go over your entrance again."

Jerry Shaw blinked his eyes, when he saw La Rue's handiwork on opening night. He had had a taste of what the interior would be like, when Sam, the colored doorman, assisted him from the cab.

Sam had on a new, smart-looking uniform. His teeth flashed white in a huge grin as he said:

"Sure feel dicty in this uniform, Mr. Shaw, sir. Man, man," he chuckled, "the street ain't ever goin' to be the same after tonight. No sir, never."

Jerry smiled and, tossing him a half dollar, walked over for a closer inspection of the exterior of the renovated Marvel Inn. Colored lights behind glass-brick exteriors gave a Christmasy effect to the front. Gone was the gaudy neon sign. In its place was a smarter and more conservative sign.

The tripod bill-board remained. But now it was illuminated by fluorescent bulbs. And the announcement now read, "The Reflection Dance, as featured by Nita." It went on to tell of her charm and beauty.

Jerry nodded his satisfaction and walked in. It was just a little early, but he wanted to see Nita before the floor show started.

The interior was exactly as he had suggested.

La Rue met him as he came through the door.

"How's it look, Shaw?" he asked, a worried frown creasing his forehead.

"Swell, Wally. Just as I suggested. And the outside is just right. Now don't worry about customers. They'll be here," Jerry said as they strolled inside.

ALREADY the place had a liberal sprinkling of bar and table customers. A small band played Latin-American rhythms for the dozen dancers on the floor.

"Nita here?" Jerry asked after watching the dancers for a few moments.

"Oh yeah, sure."

"Nervous?"

"Naw. At least she don't act it," La Rue replied.

"That's good. Now don't worry, Wally. By the time she comes out for her act, there won't be a seat open," Jerry assured him, and left to see Nita.

She was busy preparing her make-up when he walked in.

She leaped up, ran over to him and

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throwing her arms around his neck, kissed him passionately.

He held her close for a moment, then lifting her chin so her face looked up at his, stared at her for a second. Never had he seen her more beautiful.

"Nervous, dear?" he asked.

She laughed gayly.

"How can I be nervous, when my darling told me not to worry?" she asked.

He smiled at her confidence.

"That's fine. Now remember, walk to the chalk mark and stand there, back to the audience, until the 'spots' pick you up. Then baby, do your stuff. You'll kill 'em, honey."

Her smile was extinguished, as though it had been a candle in a high wind.

"What did you say?"

"I said you'd kill 'em. Why? What's wrong now?" he asked.

"Nothing, dear. Only don't say that."

He shook her gently back and forth as he said:

"So all right then. You'll wow 'em. Is that better?"

She nodded her head. Quickly and skillfully he took her mind away from danger of nerves.

"And I suppose Max has that plate you're going to use so highly polished you'll be able to see yourself in the dark?"

"Uh hunh," she murmured, pressing her face against his shoulder.

Gently he released her, saying:

"Well, dearest I've got to go out front and see that things get started." He looked at his wrist watch. "Yep, quarter of nine now. And the first act goes on at nine. You come on at nine-fifty. So I'll see you later. And don't worry," he cautioned, as he left, "you'll be terrific, honey."

La Rue sat at a table in a far corner. He was chewing nervously on an unlit cigar. Jerry sat down beside him.

"All right now Wally, take it easy. It's in the bag."

"Sure, sure," La Rue agreed pessimistically.

And it was. From the first off-color joke the master of ceremonies told, until Nita made her entrance, the audience loved it. Although there wasn't a seat to be had at either bar or table, customers still came in. Jerry had done his usual fine job of advertising a show.

THEN the orchestra started on Nita's number—and every light in the place went out. Silence met darkness. And as the patron's eyes became accustomed to it, they could detect the ghostly, shimmering figure of a woman approaching the dance floor. Slowly she walked to the center of the floor. And as she walked, a thousand pin points of light sparkled and gleamed about her. All that could be seen of her body was the marble-like whiteness of her arms and shoulders.

The effect was startling. And the customers ate it up. A collective gasp of astonishment went up from them as she came to a halt in the center of the floor. She stood there for a moment, then—three spotlights focused their blinding glare on her face. Yet it wasn't her face. For her dress had a collar which extended upward, all around, thus cutting off all except a direct front view of her face. They could see her face as it was reflected in the brass plate. And so brilliant was the spotlight glare that all one could see of her was her face.

Jerry heard the heavy breathing of the night-club owner beside him. He caught himself breathing in long shallow gasps. It was Nita . . . the effect she had on this room full of people.

Her face expressed a thousand things.

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Yet somehow none of the expressions Jerry saw was the Nita he knew and loved. These faces he saw in the plate were at one and the same time, wild, passionate, cruel, tempestuous.

"Yes," he thought, "and also obscene, horrible and vicious. My God, what an actress!"

Slowly she moved to the music. And so hypnotic was her grip on the audience that when the music ended and the spotlights went dark and she glided off, there was only silence left.

But when the lights in the club went on, there was a tremendous burst of applause. Men pounded on table-tops and women shrieked for an encore. But there was no encore. Jerry had seen to that. She came out, did her number—and that was all.

Jerry looked at La Rue. The unlit cigar La Rue had been chewing on was a broken mess on the table.

La Rue whispered:

"Sometimes I think she's a devil, the way she looks."

Jerry laughed aloud.

"I told you they'd eat her up."

"You were right." La Rue agreed. Then, realizing his club had become an overnight success, he reached for Jerry's hand and shook it, saying:

"Thanks, pal. I got to hand it to you. You sure put it over."

Jerry stood up and made for Nita's dressing room. That is he started for her room. But his connection with her success was so well known that he was stopped a half dozen times for congratulations. It was at least fifteen minutes before he was able to tear himself away from the last well-wisher.

He flung open her door and rushed into her room. She was seated before her vanity dresser. He was about to embrace her, when he heard what she was saying to her reflection:

"I won't do it. I love him too much. I'll kill myself first!"

SOMETHING in the way she sat there, something in the expression on her face, made panic rise in his breast.

"Nita!" he gasped. "What happened?"

It was though she hadn't heard him. Her voice, addressing her reflection, began to rise:

"I'll kill myself! Then you'll die too! Do you hear? You'll die too!"

Jerry did the only thing he could have done. He turned her roughly about and slapped her hard, twice.

She looked at him for a stunned second, then burst into tears. But Jerry saw that the look she gave him was sane, not the mad stare he had seen in the mirror.

Gently he comforted her, until the tears stopped and the sobbing quieted. Then he said:

"All right, baby, the war's over. And now it's time for you to tell papa all."

"It began a year ago," she said slowly, as though the memory of it was too painful a burden to be let out easily. "I was working in a spot down the street. Doing the same routine. Only with a large mirror. Max worked there too, as a sort of handy man. He used to stand and watch me go through my act. He seemed to get pleasure from it. One night, right after I got through, Max came into my room. He had a large square package with him. When he unwrapped it, I saw it was a brass plate, so highly polished I could see my reflection in it."

She shuddered violently at the memory, and as Jerry caressed her hair, she went on:

"The plate had all sorts of figures engraved on it. Max told me it was an antique and begged me to use it. Well, to humor him, I used it in my act.

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Darling, when I looked at myself in that shining surface, it seemed as though"—she paused, groping for the right phrase to describe her feelings—"as though it wasn't me I was seeing. It was someone else. I can't quite describe it. But whatever it was I saw, it was something that fascinated me. I asked Max if I could use the plate again the next night. He said the plate was mine, that I could do what I wanted with it. For a week I used it in my act and Max would wait for me, just as he does here, and polish it up.

"One night, just after the show, Max asked me to look at it. I'd never seen it so bright before. I looked into it for a couple of minutes, but it seemed like years. For as I looked, it seemed the figures on the edge of the plate came alive and that I recognized them. But when I saw my face I screamed and fainted. That's when Max came in. He saw what I looked like in the plate. When I came to, Max told me——" She stopped for so long that Jerry had to ask her to go on.

"He told me I was Medusa!"

"What!" Jerry yelled.

"Sounds crazy doesn't it? But it's the truth. Don't you see, Jerry? That's what makes my act go over. People see my face change. Not completely; that only happened the one time . . . but I know it will happen again."

"All right, honey, take it easy now. You say Max told you all this? How does he know so much?" Jerry asked.

"Max wasn't always a porter. Once he was an anthropologist. Something happened and he went a little crazy, I guess. But that's what he told me. And it's so, Jerry; I know. Poor Max, he's got an idea if he can make some sort of preparation for my hair, those little——" Again she shuddered, so violently that Jerry had to hold her tightly.

HE TILTED her chin up so her eyes looked into his.

"Now look," he commanded, "I'm telling you that the whole thing is something that Max thought up. What reason he had for it, I don't know, but I'm going to find out. What you've told me is impossible. And I'll prove it to you. By bringing Max, himself, here to you. By the way, where is he?"

"I don't know. But he lives just a block from here in a little basement flat." She gave him the address and he stood up, ready to go.

"Oh, dearest," she cried, "it's no use. I know."

"You don't know anything," he said savagely.

"Don't you remember the bird?" she asked.

He looked blank.

She handed him the little statuette of the singing bird and said:

"Here's the proof. It's a canary and once it was in a cage in my dressing room. But it saw my face and this is what happened."

Jerry's face went pale.

"Did you see it happen?" he demanded.

"No, but when Max revived me, that's what it looked like in its cage."

Jerry walked over to the plate lying in the corner where Max had his cloth and polish.

Just as she had said, the edge of the plate held a procession of figures. And Jerry remembered enough of his ancient history to identify most of them. They were the figures of ancient Greek deities.

Without another word he walked out. But in his heart was a terrible anger against the old man who had perpetrated so vile a thing against the girl.

Jerry found the place: a ratty hole at the bottom of a ramshackle frame house. He didn't bother knocking, just

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pushed the door open and walked in.

Max was standing before a small stove. He was pouring a golden-colored liquid from a small pot, into a bottle in his hand.

He peered near-sightedly at Jerry while he corked up the bottle and put it into a pocket of his coat. Then recognizing him, he said:

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want you, you damned nut," Jerry said, advancing on the old man.

Max felt the menace in Jerry's words. Slowly he backed away, saying:

"Why? What's wrong? It must be Nita. She——"

Jerry broke in:

"It's not Nita. It's you. You're coming with me and you're going to tell her how crazy you are and——" He suddenly made a dive at the old man.

Max, who had retreated into the shadows at the back of the room, brought his hand down hard. The stove poker caught Jerry full across the forehead.

MAX watched Jerry's body crumple slowly to the floor. Carefully he stepped over it and went out. And as he walked to the Marvel Inn, he cackled with hyena-like laughter.

Max opened the rear door of the club and slipped in. Stealthily he entered Nita's room. She was still sitting as Jerry had left her, dressed in her gown and facing the mirror. She saw him and asked:

"Didn't you see Jerry?"

"No," he answered and went to the plate. Taking it up, he brought it to her. There was a note of command in his cracked voice.

"Look, look long into the plate!"

Without knowing why, she took it from him and obeyed. Again she had that feeling of losing herself in the depths of the plate. Again she saw the lines form at the corner of her mouth and felt her temples throb.

Now Max took the bottle from his pocket.

"See," he said. "I brought it, like I promised. And now I'll put it on your hair."

She was powerless to move. She saw him pour the golden-colored liquid into her hair and felt his fingers rub it in.

Then she saw her face again. Saw, screamed once and fainted.

La Rue, passing her door, heard the scream. He flung the door open and took in the tableaux. Max, frightened, yet filled with unholy glee, was standing over the body of Nita.

And once again La Rue hit Max. The blow knocked the old man away from the girl. La Rue bent over her, just as consciousness returned to Nita.

She heard the sound of something heavy falling. Slowly she rose to her feet. And looked—at Max.

Max saw Nita get up and start toward him. He groaned in terror. Shielding his eyes with an arm, he tried to escape from the room. But he was too slow. She caught him, just as he reached the door.

He fought her with the frenzy which terror brings. She seemed to have but one thought in mind: to tear his hand away from his eyes. He beat and scratched at her with his free hand. But at last she got hold of the arm she wanted and slowly, inexorably, bent it away from his face.

Saliva dribbled from the corners of Max's mouth. His eyes were starting from his head in fear. Somehow, he summoned a last bit of strength and pushed her away. She staggered back, her hand grasping the small vanity for support. And when she came at him again, her hand held a steel paper-knife.

Three things happened at once. She plunged the knife downward at the old

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man; he pulled something from his pocket and tossed it into the air—and Jerry came through the open door.

WHATEVER it was that Max threw into the air burst into tongues of golden flame. And in the center of the flames, a many-hued ball revolved. It could not have lasted for more than a few seconds. Yet, to Jerry, it seemed an eternity. The ball spun around faster and faster. And as it spun, it seemed to give off streamers of color, until the whole room became a kaleidoscope of color. And what Jerry saw, he saw through that colored haze: Max on one knee, his hand still flung over his head; Nita, looking demoniac, her hair writhing about her head as though each separate hair were alive, and her hand bringing the knife down. Then the ball exploded silently in a vast puff of blinding light. Something whirred through the air past Jerry's head.

Jerry felt Max brush by him. He made no attempt to stop him. The only thought in his mind was of Nita. She had fainted. Tenderly he had lifted her and sat her in the little chair near the vanity. Quickly he found the spirits of ammonia she kept there and waved it under her nose.

"Wally!" she screamed, as she came to. "He's dead. He turned to stone when he looked at me."

She broke into a storm of tears as he helped her to her feet. Through her sobs, she murmured brokenly: "I saw it: the snakes in my hair; Wally turned to stone! I looked like something horrible——"

"Listen, honey," Jerry commanded, "you can see for yourself. Wally isn't of stone. And your hair and face are as lovely as ever. Here . . . " He picked up the plate, whose edge he caught sight of under the table. "I'll give you the plate and you can see for yourself what you look like."

But when he lifted the plate he saw that its surface was no longer bright. Something had made it turn green, as with age, and the metal was pitted, as from long years of use. And when the police surgeon arrived he gave heart-failure as the cause of Wally's death.

As they walked from the dressing room, Jerry remembered the "something" that had whirred past his head when that ball of light exploded. Acting on a vague impulse, he looked to where the tiny stone statue of a canary should have been standing.

It was gone.

THE END

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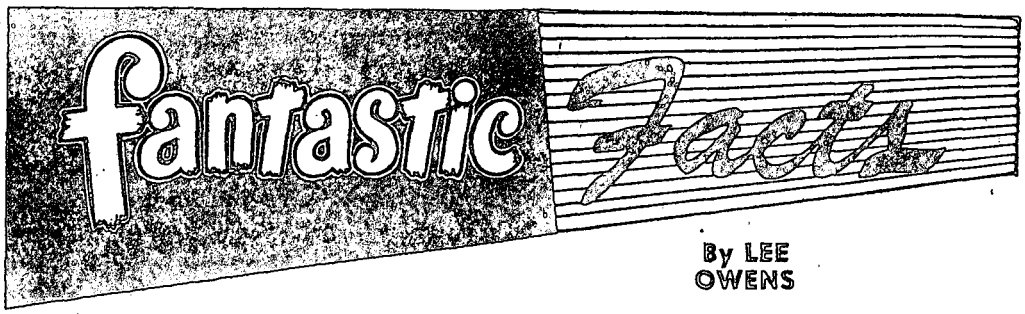

By LEE OWENS

A SKULL named Claudius was a boon to the Australian troops stationed somewhere in free Netherlands New Guinea, for he brought them fresh fruits and other foods raised in the region to supplement their rationed diet.

Claudius originated as a gag. Australians at an outpost found an old skull which they set up in an appropriate spot. A ventriloquist officer used his knowledge to furnish it with vocal powers. Natives were so awed and impressed by Claudius's oratorical abilities that they brought propitiatory gifts of food for the talented skull.

His reputation among the Papuans grew still greater when troublesome native children were awed into good behavior at the sight of Claudius's eyes glowing with anger—an effect produced by the installation of battery-powered electrical bulbs.

But now Claudius is still. The ventriloquist officer has been transferred to other parts.

A FEW years ago triptane, the world's most powerful gasoline, was a laboratory curiosity, which has been made commercially practical by Professor Vladmir Ipatieff.

Triptane has been found to be 25 percent more potent than any gasoline ever invented. Technically, triptane is not a gasoline but another hydrocarbon.

This fuel is so powerful that as yet no engine exists which can use it in the pure state. At present it is being fed into high octane virtually with a medicine dropper—much as tetra-ethyl lead is added. Even in such small quantities the effect is to whoop up engine performance beyond anything hitherto known.

To get the most out of triptane, new and radically different high compression engines must be constructed.

This also enables us to picture ourselves living in the typical Flash Gordon era with super-accellerated sky rockets powered with triptane.

MOST of us regard spiders as a nuisance and destroy them whenever we get a chance, but few know that spiders are doing their part in the war effort.

Spider silk is being used today to produce a fine thread which serves as the cross hairs on telescopes, microscopes, range finders, submarine periscopes, and bomb sights. Nothing else has been discovered which can do the work as well in high precision instruments. It is so fine that even a diamond cannot scratch a comparable line and so strong that it exceeds the strength of a steel wire with the same thickness.

The spider silk is removed from the spider in very much the same manner that a metal thread is produced from a wire mill. The spider is held securely and when its spinning organs are excited the silk comes out as a liquid that hardens upon contact with the air. As it hardens the silk is very carefully wound on a reel. At the present time a hundred foot reel of the silk sells for approximately nine dollars.

So the next time you want to step on a spider think twice. For all you know he might have just come off the swing shift of a defense plant.

WE ALL marvel at the amazing way in which the Chinese have fought the Japs for so many years. How, we ask, can people expect to fight machine guns with sticks and stones? The answer is very simple. The Chinese have developed this stick-to-it spirit many centuries ago and nothing the Japs can do will ever conquer the country or enslave the people.

Just to illustrate, take the Chinese salt wells. Salt is a commodity that is essential for life and when the Chinese discovered that salt could be had by drilling, they decided to sink wells. The fact that they didn't have machinery couldn't stop them. They used bamboo, fibers, and scrap metal to drill wells over 1000 feet deep. Some of the wells took almost a hundred years to dig, but now they are producing salt. These wells were started by far-sighted men, who utilized their spare time to drill through the hard rock. The work was continued by each succeeding generation until the third or fourth generation realized the profit.

These wells are still hand operated and the process is very laborious. First water must be carried and poured into the well. The water dissolves the salt and this mixture is brought to the surface in bamboo buckets. Then the solution is evaporated by boiling to produce the salt. Because their forefathers had vision and tenacity, the present generations have salt and a good business. People like that are hard to conquer.

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The MARTIAN and the MILKMAID

By FRANCES M. DEEGAN

Illustrated by Hadden

He arrived in the midst of a storm, as a meteor struck the earth. Who was this man with the strange, compelling eyes; what was his amazing mission?

THE road was impossible. What it was doing to my car for the duration was the last straw.

The fact that the Diacol Company allowed their field geologists six cents a mile was no help if the car was shaken to jittering, irreplaceable bits, while I chased meteorites in the wilds of North Dakota.

More than once in the past six weeks I'd had cause to reflect on the diabolical tendency of meteors on the loose to select the most inaccessible localities as a place to sit down.

So far my quest had been conspicuously lacking in success. I had visited the last resting places of three alleged meteors without finding what I was supposed to be looking for—an enriched deposit of diatomaceous silicon dioxide.

My confidential reports to Diacol had begun to take on a somewhat bitter tone, which elicited nothing but cheerful, back-slapping letters of encouragement. All written by executives lolling comfortably in their air-conditioned offices, while I clattered over rutted, stone-imbedded back roads, assailed by insects, heat, and at the moment a finely powdered alkali dust which penetrated everywhere and tasted like sulphur.

I was tired, sore, hot, and limp with hunger. Every jolt added to my angry discomfort and I made up my mind then and there that if this one fizzled out, as I had no doubt it would, the only sensible procedure was to take a week off and go on a quiet, methodical binge. Preferably with moronic companions who were not concerned with expired meteors and their possible effect on fossilized deposits.

Some one like Hebe, for instance. Blond, buxom, generous and mentally enervating—but physically restful. Yes, Hebe would be eminently satisfactory—after I had finished my visit with Mr. and Mrs. Henshaw.

The Henshaw farmstead, when it finally hove in sight, was a weather-beaten collection of sagging frame structures. A narrow lane turned off the road where a rural delivery mail box leaned tipsily, and meandered toward the gray huddle with discouraging reluctance. In the sunset glow house and barns seemed to be floating like a disembodied mirage in an unnatural crimson mist.

Mr. and Mrs. Henshaw came forth to greet me. They matched the buildings and general atmosphere of the place. They were old and gray and weather-beaten. But they were cordial enough.

"Howdy," the old man said. "You must be this here new science feller wrote us a while back about comin' to

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His eyes met mine, and it seemed as if I were being studied from every angle

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investigate our meteor. My name's Bill Henshaw—this here's Margie, my wife."

"Glad to know you." I got out of the car stiffly and shook hands with each of them. "My name's Howard Clement. Hope I'm not putting you out by my visit."

"Goshamighty, no. Tickled to have you. We don't get much company way off here, an' there's only Margie an' me an' the Gook—"

"Bill, don't stand there a-gabbin'," Margie interrupted. "Help Mr. Clement get his things unloaded. I 'spect he could do with a wash and somethin' to eat. I'll just put the coffee pot on an' have a snack dished up, time you get inside. Step lively now." She bustled into the house followed by my heartfelt approval and blessing.

BILL gazed at my collection of field equipment as I unloaded it and stacked it on the back porch. He moved his battered felt hat to one side and scratched his head.

"I-gollies!" he opined. "Never see such a lotta contraptions. We'll have to put all this away some place where the Gook can't get at it. Quite a one for tinkerin', Gook is. Always takin' things apart an' puttin' 'em back together some other way."

I straightened with an exasperated scowl. "Nobody," I declared, "touches any part of my equipment. I want that understood right now."

Bill reversed his hat and scratched the opposite side of his grizzled thatch. "Trouble is," he said, "Gook, he don't understand things like most people does. Ain't no use tellin' him to leave things alone—he just goes and tinkers anyhow."

"Who the hell is this Gook?" I exploded. "Can't you control him? What is he—a maniac?"

"Ain't no cause to get riled up," Bill said mildly. "Gook, he's a kind of idjit, but he don't mean no harm. An' sometimes he does right good with his tinkerin'. You'd be surprised."

"There'll be no half-wit tinkering with my equipment!" I shouted. "This stuff is worth more than your whole farm, and even if you could afford it, half of it couldn't be replaced today. There happens to be a war going on. You let me catch your Gook within ten feet of my stuff and I'll twist his arms out and beat his head off—I'll—"

"Now, now," Bill said soothingly. "Don't go gettin' all het up. Reckon you're plumb tuckered out with your trip an' all. You'll feel better directly you eat somethin' an' rest up a spell. Meantime we'll just cart all your contraptions inside an' shove 'em under your bed where they'll be outa sight."

"If you think I'm going to set up my field laboratory under the bed, you're crazier than your damn Gook!" I sputtered. "I'll pile it all back in the car and drive back to town before I'll put up with any such nonsense. I'm about fed up with this whole business anyway—"

My sputtering died away in angry mumbling. Bill had hoisted the portable microscope and disappeared into the house with it. And I was confronted with nothing more tangible than the fragrant aroma of boiling coffee and a clatter of heavy dishes, that was somehow associated with the thought of country ham and eggs and fried potatoes and homemade bread . . .

I picked up a case of slides and followed Bill into the house.

AS IT turned out, there was ham and fried potatoes, and thick slices of homemade bread with heavy yellow butter—but no eggs.

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"Couple eggs would go good with this," Bill remarked, as if reading my mind. "But Gook, he's hatchin' the eggs. Got a kind of incubator rigged up with oil lamps. Takes about three settin's a year and does pretty good with 'em. Makes a little change off the fryers an' keeps the best stock to build up next year's flock. Got so we got about the best chickens round about here. People come all the way 'cross state to buy a few hens or settin' eggs. I don't know—Gook, he's got a kind of knack with things like that. Don't know what we'd done without him last thirty-forty years."

"It's forty-three years since he come, an' you know it," Margie said. "Come same time that there meteor did, in the storm an' all—an' him wanderin' around without a stitch to his back."

"Yessir, that's right," Bill said, putting down his thick cup. "Be forty-three years come August. Hot—it was hot as all get out that year. 1901 it was an' I had forty acres planted in wheat. Well sir, that there danged meteor plowed up the whole forty. Then there come a cloud burst, drowned out everythin' else. An' next day we find Gook wanderin' around, buck naked an' lost as a homeless squirrel. Yessir, we sure was wrecked that time, but we never made no mistake when we took Gook in."

"Escaped he was," Margie put in. "In the storm an' excitement an' all. He sure was abused, pore thing. Had lumps an' bruises all over him—an' dazed! My lands, he just laid for days without movin' or makin' a sound. Took a long time before we made him understand we wasn't going to hurt him no more. Then he begun to sit up an' take notice of things. Couldn't even talk sensible. You remember, Bill, what a time we had teachin' him words. I guess whoever had him locked up never took no trouble with him. All he kept sayin' was 'Gook! Gook!' So that's what we called him—Gook. An' he seemed satisfied with it."

"That was your doin'," Bill acceded with rough pride. "Margie, she's got a way with hurt birds, an' sick pigs, an' things like that. She kinda took a shine to the Gook from the first an' they got along first rate. So 'course I didn't have no choice. I just kinda strung along, an' pretty soon I see where the Gook, he don't mean no harm, he just wants to be let alone. So we let him alone, an' he don't hurt nothin'—much."

I tried to get a word in about the necessity of safeguarding my equipment, but these two had gone too long without an audience. I hadn't a chance.

"Hurt nothin'!" Margie sniffed. "I should say he don't. 'Course he wrecked the windmill a couple times. But he finally got it to workin' better than it ever did. An' the way he fixed up my old washer an' wringer—well—"

"Margie, she's got patience," Bill explained. "She goes by the end result. Thing don't work first few times, she bides her tongue an' waits it out, an' first thing you know, sure as shootin', she's got what she wants. Never see it to fail. Her an' Gook, they got a kind of understandin'. Somethin' don't just suit her an' pretty soon Gook, he's tinkerin' with it. An' then 'fore you know it, it's workin' like a clock."

"Set!" Margie said suddenly, and I looked up and the Gook was with us.

TALL and slender and dark-skinned, he had a queer olive green tinge, and wore black glasses. He moved with a graceful, flowing motion that wasted no effort, like an animal, or a nerveless half-wit. He sat and he spoke.

"Howdy," he said, and because I was

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tired and all my senses felt like they had been tramped on, I experienced the sudden chill I sometimes have in dreams when I find myself standing on the brink of a vast, unknown void. I had to shake myself mentally to answer his mellow, vibrant greeting.

"Howdy," I said, somewhat stupidly, and then stared aghast as he calmly accepted a cup of Margie's excellent coffee and dumped a large helping of homemade chili sauce into his cup.

Bill chuckled, and said, "Gook, he's real fond of Margie's ketchup. Puts it on about everythin' he eats."

"I think he's anemic, myself," Margie said. "He just naturally craves red-blooded food."

"Remember the time we butchered the hog?" Bill said, and was promptly silenced by a severe glance from Margie.

I began to feel decidedly uncomfortable, especially since the creature paused in his eating every once in a while to direct a long, blank stare at me from behind the black glasses. I had no confidence at all in Bill's assertion that he was harmless. He looked lethal as a lynx to me.

He was dressed, like Bill, in faded blue shirt and overalls, but he bore no resemblance to any farmer I had ever seen. He had amazingly long, graceful hands and the long head and fawn-like ears of a satyr. The last rays of the setting sun touched his fine black hair, showing purple tints. Repeated use of certain hair dyes, I knew, gave the hair a purple tint, and I began to wonder just what the naive Bill and Margie were concealing here on their remote farm.

"What's your interest in this here meteor, Mr. Clement?" Bill asked. "You figgerin' on tryin' to measure it, or what?"

"No, I merely want to see what effect it had on the soil and rock formations," I explained. "My company uncovered an unusually rich deposit of diatoms* where a meteorite had landed about 150 years ago. Some hare-brained chemist got the idea that the meteor landed in that spot because the diatoms had a magnetic attraction for it, and that the mysterious composition of the meteor was responsible for enriching the deposit. I have been delegated to locate similar deposits wherever a meteor is reported to have landed. So far I have had no luck."

The Gook stared at me in blank silence.

"What's these here die—whatcha-callems?" Bill looked interested.

"Diatoms? They're dirt. Just plain dirt."

"Oh." Bill was disappointed. "Reckon we got plenty o' that."

"What good is it, if you find it?" Margie asked practically.

"Commercially, it's a gold mine—if I find it," I said. "Diatomaceous earth has thousands of uses today. It's used in everything from explosives to perfume, and is necessary to every branch of industry from sugar refining to building materials."

"Whew-ee!" Bill puffed. "Never

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*DIATOMS are microscopic plants that thrive and multiply in moisture. They are found in any body of water and wherever moisture collects, even in our drinking water. They die, become fossilized and gradually form a deposit of earth. A cubic inch of commercially valuable deposit contains from twenty to seventy-five million dead diatoms. This diatomaceous earth has thousands of uses, some of the more important being high temperature insulation, insulating cement and refractory bricks; filtration of food products, pharmaceutical supplies, wines and liquors, and many types of industrial liquids; filler material for a wide number of products, such as paints, molded plastics, battery box compositions, flooring and roofing materials, asphalt, rubber and paper. It is also used in soaps, cosmetics, inks, abrasives, etc.; the list is endless, and still growing as research scientists continue their experiments with the raw material.—ED.

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knew dirt could be that useful. How can you tell when you find it?"

"You can't without a microscope," I said. "And even then it requires extensive laboratory tests to determine the value of the deposit. But don't let me get your hopes up." I was already kicking myself for having talked too much, as I do sometimes when I am tired. "Actually I don't expect to find anything. I think that chemist was having a pipe dream."

"More than likely." Bill readily dismissed the onerous prospect of owning a commercial gold mine.

He was, in his way I suppose, a philosopher, who accepted life without complaint or too much curiosity. For this I was thankful since I was in no mood to have a greedy farmer breathing down my neck while I went about my tests. It was bad enough to contemplate the forceful tactics that might be necessary to ward off the tinkering proclivities of the Gook.

I EXCUSED myself from the table and went out to examine my car to make sure it was securely locked before going upstairs to my room. It was hot and close in the room and I left the door open.

Tired as I was, I wanted to check my equipment to see how it had withstood the trip, and have everything in readiness for an early start in the morning. The sooner I got this one over, the quicker I would be on my way back to civilization and that binge with Hebe.

I thought of her as I made my preparations and realized that I had not fully appreciated her restful qualities heretofore. Ordinarily she bored me. Her vacuous and totally innocent blue eyes, her plump blonde prettiness, and her complete lack of sense had always left me cold. Hebe, whose name originally was no doubt Susie or Mabel, was one of the Broadway characters who had come to be included in the somewhat cosmopolitan group who made up my acquaintances in New York.

She was definitely out of place on Broadway. She should have been a comfortable farm wife and mother, as nature intended. Instead she was a Broadway character. A few years before she had won a milking contest at a county fair. Part of the reward was a trip to the World's Fair, where she continued to demonstrate her milking technique, billed as Hebe, Goddess of the Dairy.

Somehow she never did get around to going back home again. She married, of course. The fellow was a fifth rate fighter, at least partially punch drunk, and never seemed to be home.

He was always "on the road" traveling the small time boxing circuits, preparing to stage a come back. This was a somewhat mystifying process, since he had never been anywhere worth coming back to as far as boxing annals were concerned. Hebe, of course, had children with regular frequency and astonishingly little inconvenience. At latest reports there were four of them, all blond, beautiful, and good tempered . . .

It was perhaps significant that at this point in my thoughts of Hebe, I straightened up from examining and loading my camera, and discovered that the Gook was with me. He prowled across the room with deliberate, catfooted silence and seated himself in the rocking chair.

We examined each other without speaking, and I thought that since it had to come some time, I might as well get this matter of the tinkering settled once and for all.

I selected a narrow steel yardstick and laid it in readiness on the patchwork quilt. The moment he extended

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one of those long, prehensible hands to touch anything I meant to give him a sharp lash across the wrist. Then as an afterthought I laid a short handled sledge hammer alongside it, and went on cleaning and arranging my equipment.

Except for my movement the room was very still. My visitor made no more sound than a sleeping cat, but I felt the stare behind those black glasses following my every gesture. I began to wonder about his eyes and the reason for the glasses. It also occurred to me that if he had lived on the farm for forty-three years he must have been very young when he arrived. I had somehow gotten the impression that he was full grown when Bill and Margie found him, but in that case he would now be a man of sixty and he scarcely looked forty. Some types of the mentally unsound, of course, were apt to retain their youthful appearance, but surely not past the age of sixty.

WHEN at last my equipment was all in order and he had made no move or sound, I stood there and stared back at him, trying to think of adequate words to express my desire to be relieved of his presence.

He spoke first, and his question nearly floored me.

"Are you intelligent?" he inquired.

"What? Certainly I'm intelligent!" I sputtered.

"In my experience," he said sadly, "nothing is less certain on this haphazard planet than intelligence. I do not believe real intelligence exists. It is pathetic."

I sat down on the bed with all my thoughts badly disarranged. "That's —er interesting," I said limply. "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"It is not interesting and we are not concerned with my general impression," he said. "At the moment I should like to know specifically how intelligent you are."

How high is up, I thought wildly, and wanted to laugh. Instead I decided to play along with him. "Why?" I demanded.

"Because if you have any intelligence at all, I intend to use it," he replied calmly. "It is quite clear that you are a different type than any I have come in contact with so far. I can assure you that you will not find any evidence of a fallen meteor here. Do you know why?"

"No, but I wish you'd tell me," I encouraged him. The uneasy conviction that I had a dangerous maniac on my hands was growing by the minute. This fellow was no half-wit.

His long hands floated up to his face and the glasses came away. His eyes were a greenish yellow in the dark, smooth face—flat, unwinking animal eyes, and then a spark appeared in their depths and I felt their force and knew a grinding fear. There was mesmerism in those eyes, and a powerful, if warped mentality behind it.

"I am not of your planet," he said slowly in that vibrant voice. "The so-called meteor was my ship, powered by energy from cosmic rays. The gravitational pull of your planet was too strong for the controls of the ship. It was totally destroyed, but the mechanism blasted me clear at the moment of contact with the earth. I came from the planet you call Mars."

Those dynamic eyes were on me and I suddenly imagined I heard the sound of singing distance and space, and I felt the cold sweep of timeless spheres. Unimaginable things started pawing at my brain, and I experienced again the chill I had known in dreams at the edge of the void.

I reminded myself angrily that I was

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near exhaustion, that brain and nerves were not functioning normally, and that I must keep my head and handle this fellow tactfully.

"That—that's very interesting," I said lamely.

"You find it difficult to believe?"

"Very difficult."

"But you do not disbelieve?"

"Oh, no—no indeed," I assured him hastily, lest he decide to take persuasive measures.

"You have an open mind," he said. "You showed that when you refused to accept the theories of your chemist, although he is probably not so far wrong at that. The trouble is that what you have been investigating were not meteors, but other ships from my planet. We have been trying for some time to establish communication with your lush earth."

"That's a nice neighborly gesture," I said. "We must arrange to come and see you some time, too."

"You would not enjoy it," he said gravely. "Our planet is virtually sterile. We are rapidly losing the power of reproduction. That is why we are so interested in this prolific earth of yours. If we could transport some of the germs responsible for the lush growth and constant renewal of all forms of life, perhaps we might fertilize our weary old world. Had we not discovered the secret of longevity, our planet would almost certainly be completely barren by this time."

"Perhaps it is." I endeavored to match his gravity. "You've been away a good while now, haven't you? Almost half a century."

"That is a very brief period according to our measurement of time. I told you that we had the secret of longevity. How old would you say that I am?"

"Around forty."

"Forty of your short years?" I was beginning to realize that he never smiled or changed expression. "No. Measured by your time my age would be closer to 400, and that is comparatively young. That is why I can afford to be patient while waiting for your backward civilization to advance to the point where practical communications can be established between your world and mine."

"I imagine you do find it somewhat primitive off here in the wilderness," I declared inanely. "I could show you a somewhat different stage of advancement in New York."

He wafted himself out of the rocking chair like slow smoke and bowed formally. "I shall be happy to accompany you," he said. Then he was gone. And I seemed to have got myself a Gook . . .

I DID not rest at all well that night. When I did fall asleep I kept bumping over a rutted road only to arrive at the brink of the familiar black void, with the chill of fathomless space reaching for me. As a result I overslept and came downstairs with an overgrown grouch.

Margie was alone in the kitchen. She already had the trusty coffee pot boiling on the oil stove, and she fussed over me as if I were her favorite child, grouch and all.

Any hope that I might have misunderstood matters the night before was quickly dissipated.

"Gook says he's figgerin' to go back with you," Margie informed me. "I think that's real nice of you, Mr. Clement. Do him a world of good to get away for a spell, and he seems right fond of you."

"He's attached to me, all right," I admitted glumly. "You were telling me yesterday that you had to teach him words at first. He seems to have progressed amazingly."

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"Yessir, I'm real proud of the way he took hold an' just kep' a-studyin' all these years. I started him out with a little old reader I had, an' he always did show an interest in books. I remember how he used to puzzle over the mail order catalogs when they come."

"He must have had something more than mail order catalogs," I objected.

"Oh, he did," Margie admitted happily. "About fifteen years ago when they built the big consolidated school at the county seat, they auctioned off a whole slew of things out of the little country schools. We got some real valuable books for almost nothin'. One of them big, fat dictionaries—of course the cover was gone, but all the words was there."

I absorbed this speech gloomily. She couldn't be making all that up. It was too pat and altogether too possible.

"He must have been pretty young when you found him," I suggested.

"Well sir, that's another remarkable thing." She wiped her hands on her apron thoughtfully. "He ain't changed a mite since the day he come here. Would you believe it?"

"I guess I'll have to," I sighed, and finished my coffee.

I loaded my gear into the car and drove off across bumpy hillocks toward the burial site of the meteor-Martianship. It was simply a ragged field—nothing more. The whole farm showed signs of neglect, and I had an idea that after viewing the disastrous results forty-three years ago, Bill had never again ventured to draw down the wrath of the heavens by planting wheat or anything else in large quantities.

My preliminary tests were sufficient to convince me that here was no diatomaceous deposit, but only rich black loam that needed to be planted. Nevertheless I continued my examination in the hope of finding some evidence that a large hot body had hurled itself at the field. There was nothing, of course. The cloud burst that followed the thing and forty years of wind and rain had leveled the field. Short of excavating the whole place, there was no sure way of determining what had buried itself here.

At noon I drove back to the house, framing caustic phrases to be included in my next report to Diacol, and pondering the possibility of putting the Gook on my expense account.

"Feeding, clothing and transporting one Gook—$673.58."

Something like that. That ought to cure the executive committee of sending me out after defunct meteorites . . .

NEW YORK was unpleasantly hot when we arrived. I had left the car and stored most of my equipment in Bismarck where my questionable companion was outfitted in a conservative city suit and accessories. His appearance and manner were ultra-civilized. Several pairs of dark glasses insured concealment of his cat eyes at all times, and liberal applications of olive oil darkened the purple tints in his hair.

We took a train to Chicago where we had to stop over a day and a half, waiting for plane reservations. It was here that we had an understanding and devised a name and personality to fit the erstwhile Gook. That actually was his name, he insisted.

I had no intention of introducing him anywhere as a Martian. This was not out of consideration for the Gook, but simply for my own protection. I could visualize the frenzied mobs that would greet any such announcement—we would both undoubtedly be torn to pieces in very short order.

I explained all this over a bottle of Scotch in our hotel room. He liked the Scotch and I promised him that if he

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would quit pouring catsup all over everything he ate, he could have a regular ration of Scotch. He was perfectly agreeable to this and to all my suggestions.

Since he was obviously the wrong color for a pure Caucasian, I determined to represent him as an East Indian of mixed parentage. A highly cultured refugee who did not wish to speak of his experiences, nor of his former life.

I christened him George—George Guk. And then I got right down to business and told him plainly that I had no intention of supporting him indefinitely. I didn't care, I said, whether he was a visiting fireman from Mars or an escaped lunatic, the present economic system would not allow me to take on total dependents indiscriminately.

"Your economic system is absurd, of course," he said. "It is no system at all, but rather a symptom. A symptom of the barbaric confusion of your existence. You should abolish all economic theories."

"We won't go into that just now," I said. "Whatever your individual opinion is, the system or symptom is in effect, and we'll just have to abide by it for the time being. In other words, you'll have to earn your own way if you're going with me."

"That is regrettable," he said sadly.

"Lots of people feel that way about it," I told him. "I may be able to get you a fairly soft job, however, with Diacol. In every large company there is always a certain percentage of cush jobs for those that want them. As long as you remember to stick to your new personality of George Guk, you'll be all right. But you go making any funny statements about the climate on Mars, and you'll wake up in a padded cell."

"I would not care for that," he murmured.

"No, you would not," I said. "So just be sure to watch your step—for my sake as well as your own."

I was sticking my neck out, of course, but I was frankly curious. I could never have become a geologist had it not been for this insatiable curiosity of mine. I had a distinct aversion for the actual labor of my profession, but always that tantalizing wish to find out what the next stratum looked like would drive me on.

I THINK that what was largely responsible for driving me on in the case of George Guk was the fact that he refused to be impressed by the wonders of civilization. For a being who had supposedly spent the whole of his earthly existence on an isolated farm with no modern improvements, he was annoyingly critical of the radio, the telephone, electrical appliances, and even the plumbing fixtures. He was not petulant about it, he merely pointed out in a disinterested way that the plumbing backed up; the light globes burned out; the telephone sometimes got the wrong number; and the radio had fits of static.

He contended that it was rather silly to go to the expense and bother of making these things if they didn't work, and of course, he had me there. It was useless to explain that they were constantly being improved. He insisted that they should have been done right in the first place. As it was, he said, they simply added to the confusion we humans seemed bent upon creating.

The war, too, he considered merely a symptom of our barbarism. "Such things are wanton waste and should never be allowed to happen," he said. "But I suppose it is unavoidable in your present uncultured state. The trouble is, you have too much for your own good. You are glutted with a profusion of everything and so you turn to quar-

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reling among yourselves, and wasting as much as possible in the frantic effort to use it up."

"The majority of the earth's population," I told him, "desire peace above everything else."

"My observations would not seem to indicate it," he replied. "I once assisted at the birth of a child. The woman was foolishly trying to get from one place to another before the child was born. She failed to make it and stopped at the Henshaw farm in the middle of the night. Mr. Henshaw hitched up the horses and drove off for a doctor. Mrs. Henshaw and I were forced to attend the woman. That child was fighting before he drew his first breath. You humans fight your way into the world, fight all through life, and then fight your way out again. It is senseless."

"Maybe. But it's fun," I said. "How would you have us do it?"

"At some distant time in the future this planet will have achieved the high degree of culture and intelligence which we, on our planet, have known for many centuries," he said. "Then all men will be truly equal. There will be no need for fighting and waste. The people of earth will look back on the history of rapacity and greed and double-dealing with abhorrence, and they will destroy all record and trace of their shameful ancestors. They will regard the sloth and filth and disease and discomfort of your present existence with repugnance. And they will be unable to understand your worship of money and your lust for puny possessions. All of life will be easy and graceful because intelligent humans will have learned to put their physical, mental and spiritual gifts to the highest and best use."

There was no use arguing with him. We simply weren't tuned in on the same wave length, so I let him have his opinion and he let me have mine. That's the way it was when we arrived in New York in the middle of June.

As soon as possible, I took him out to the plant and introduced him to the Personnel Director. I had pulled a few strings among the executives and the order went down the line to find a comfortable berth in the organization for my worthy refugee. Meanwhile he shared my apartment on Fifty-ninth Street.

SEVERAL days went by during which George Guk was given the run of the plant in order to familiarize himself with the organization, and I settled down to the volume of paper work that Diacol requires of everybody from the truck drivers to the vice presidents.

I looked up Hebe and she was as plumply soft and vacant-eyed as I had hoped she would be, but I did not go on a binge after all. Because Hebe lost all interest in me the minute she entered my apartment and saw the sleek George Guk. Since I had already explained Hebe to him, the fascination was mutual.

With the illegal help of one of my less respectable acquaintances, an imposing set of identification papers was furnished for my refugee, together with a medical certificate, which Diacol required of all employees. George Guk was quite emphatic about the inadvisability of letting a licensed practitioner examine him, though I must confess I was curious to find out what the professional judgment might be.

The affair between Hebe and George Guk seemed to be progressing at a disturbing rate, but there was really nothing I could do about it. I was more alarmed over the fact that he had landed in the experimental laboratory at the plant.

I made a few tactful inquiries, tending to question the wisdom of this; but

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everybody was firmly convinced that he not only belonged there but was contributing valuable knowledge toward the production of some highly important secret.

Judging from his first month's pay, it must have been considered important. As soon as he got his check he came into my office and handed it to me without comment. It was nearly three times what I was getting.

I had to make a field trip in August. I was gone for three weeks and when I got back to New York, I learned what George Guk had been working on. He had fused a metal alloy with a Diacol fabrication to make a strong, light plastic material that was unaffected by intense heat or cold, withstood prolonged pressure of unbelievable strength, and was apparently impervious to all manner of stress and strain.

The immediate thought, of course, was to adapt it for plane use, and already a large experimental bomber of the latest secret design had been constructed. Preliminary tests had been amazing and on Sunday, two days hence, George Guk was going to take it up himself for first hand observation in order to make his final recommendations for its use.

When I heard this, I felt again the chill and pull of space—the black void. But that was nonsense, of course . . .

"How is the ship powered?" I asked the vice president in charge of production.

"Powered?" he snorted at me. "It's fueled with high octane, of course."

"That's what I thought," I said sheepishly, and went home and called Hebe. But Hebe had taken the children and gone to visit her folks on their Pennsylvania farm.

I SAT alone in the apartment and drank Scotch. George Guk was spending all his time at the secret air field until the trials were completed. Thus I spent two days in nervous suspense that I couldn't explain, even to myself . . .

The plane *was* powered with high octane gas, of course. And not even a full load, at that. It will be found sooner or later—or at least what is left of it. It was too bad to lose a brilliant worker like George Guk, but Diacol still has his formula for the plastic.

I wrote to Mr. and Mrs. Henshaw and told them the Gook was dead. He is dead, of course. There can't be any doubt about it.

The trouble is that Hebe has disappeared too. She took the family car that Sunday and drove off into the hills alone and that's the last anybody ever saw of her. There did happen to be a plane in the vicinity. Several people saw it, flying low as though it were going to land. But nobody could identify it.

I have been thinking that it would be quite a job to remove the wings from a big plane like that. And even with all the facilities of a complete modern laboratory like Diacol's at hand, it doesn't seem possible that any one individual could create the equipment necessary to power a plane with energy drawn from cosmic rays—even if they knew how.

Still, it's an amusing thought . . . that the placid Hebe may be on her way to Mars with the Gook . . . on her way to help repopulate a planet. . . .

THE END

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FAIR EXCHANGE

By MILES SHELTON

BEFORE the accident I was just an ordinary dog, part collie, part spaniel, part pointer, and the rest assorted. I loved my master and he loved me. We suffered through his troubles together.

My master had married trouble. Her name was Henrietta. She wore sharp pointed shoes, and although her ankles were skinny, she could kick hard enough to break a canine rib. I should know.

Her face, when she had make-up on, was something like a bad natured Indian under war paint. Without the make-up it wasn't much of a face, just a condition of bony-ness in repulsive shapes. Her nose was long like a knotty piece of wood, and her neck was full of cords, always full of anger.

You'll wonder how my master happened to marry her. He confided to me one time that it happened when he was under the influence of alcohol. It must have been an awful shock when he sobered. That is proved by the fact that he swore off drinking for life.

Henrietta didn't want any children, and that's how I happened to come to their home. You see, Jack tried to make the best of a bad bargain. A

Illustrated by James Devereux

Dog and man stared forlornly at each other. But which was which?

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Since his wife led him the life of a dog, it was only right that she be married to one!

fellow like him, with calm gray eyes, and a harmless, pleasant face, would be a good father, you know. For awhile he clung to the hope that a kiddie or two might come. But Henrietta didn't want any yowling brats to take care of.

So, for company, Jack got me when I was just a pup. Right from the start he made me know that his home was mine.

Henrietta didn't like it. She tried to put her foot down, but Jack got his down first. So she said, "All right, if the pup can learn to sleep under the sink so I won't hear that leaky drain pipe all night—all right."

Jack fixed the drain pipe, and they gave me a mat under the kitchen sink for a bed. And the first thing I learned was that Henrietta didn't like to do the dishes; the breakfast dishes made her sullen every morning; they made her feel like kicking. Lesson number one for me: to clear out from under the sink before the dishes.

Henrietta called me Drip because I was always under the pipes. Jack called me Solomon because he said I looked so wise.

I tried to be wise, since that was the way he wanted me. He talked things over with me because he needed someone who could understand. By the time I was two I could understand a great deal.

I WELL remember that night he read me *The Taming of the Shrew.* Henrietta had picked a quarrel with him that night, so that she could walk out in a pout and then meet one of her friends at the tavern.

"I'm going over to Kitty's," she said. "You can get your own supper or go without. I'm tired of doing nothing but getting your meals . . . Don't talk back to me. Good-*bye.*"

If I could have talked I'd have told Jack that she had made it up with Kitty earlier in the day that she would pull this little scene so she could walk out mad. But I couldn't talk. Poor, patient Jack—he only shrugged and wondered what he'd said to start her off in such a temper.

I nuzzled my head up against his knees to comfort him, and he smiled down and stroked my throat.

"We'll have T-bone steaks tonight, Solomon," he said. "Then we'll have a quiet evening of reading."

So we had delicious steaks at a restaurant and came home and read Mr. Shakespeare's story about a terrible woman who would lose her temper and throw things at her husband.

"It's my favorite story," Jack smiled sadly. "That lady wasn't anything to Henrietta, was she?"

I remember that night not only for the story, or the steaks, but also because of the closer bond it cemented between Jack and me. From then on he didn't try so hard to get along with his wife. He had discovered it was much simpler getting along without her.

On another night he read me part of *Rip Van Winkle*—the part about *his* wife, Dame Van Winkle, and what a terror to old Rip she was.

Then, "Poor old Rip," Jack would say. "He didn't know when he was well off."

I could only answer with a little bark and a sympathetic look.

"It's too bad that faithful dogs like you can't talk," he said. "Now I'm going to tell you something, Solomon. This week there'll be a new pet coming to live here—a parrot."

I jumped up with an awful "Bow-wow!" because Jack's manner made me uneasy.

He said, "Between you and me I think Henrietta is just getting it because she thinks there'll be trouble. A

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parrot can talk. She thinks you'll be jealous. And she knows how dogs generally act toward birds."

Birds? My ears went up. Birds were good sport to chase, even though you didn't often catch one. So this parrot was a bird. M-m-m . . .

"You've been so perfect," said Jack, "that she hasn't had much chance to kick you around."

(Little did he know. He should have been a little mouse in the corner the day I nipped the milkman on the ankles for getting fresh with Henrietta. If she didn't give me an awful threshing for butting in!)

"I want you to promise me," he said, "that as long as you and I and Henrietta are living together we'll do our best to get along peaceably. And that you'll never pick on the parrot or give it any trouble. Do you understand? . . . I believe you do."

The parrot came that week, and she turned out to be a sort of Henrietta in feathers. Somewhat better looking, I must admit; but it was the disposition that counted. She was an arrogant, haughty, scolding creature, with a very uncultured vocabulary.

FOR the first two days Henrietta sat around with a brass curtain rod ready to strike me if I made one false move toward her pet's cage. And with a quick yellow eye for trouble, Pauline, the parrot, imitated her mistress' attitude. However, I ignored her.

That was a bad week, nevertheless. I wished I could have gone down to the big department store with Jack, the way I sometimes did on those nights when he had to go back and help with inventories.

Before the end of the week Pauline was calling me names. It was ignorance on her part. But the cynical squawk of her voice was hard to take. Still, I ignored her.

Then Henrieta tried letting her out of the cage, a few minutes at a time. I knew there was going to be trouble. How I wished Jack would get home, to take me out for a walk. If Pauline was to have the run of the house, I really should be outdoors. Two birds in the bush are much safer than one at hand, if I may coin a maxim from the canine viewpoint.

Pauline strutted around the room. She hopped from the back of the chair to the clock shelf, then down to the kitchen table (where I had never been allowed to lay a paw) and down to the footstool. She hopped on the coffee table and sampled the grapes from the fruit dish. She jumped to the floor and kicked some of my playthings around.

Still I ignored her—until she discovered my food and water under the sink.

Henrietta stood by and watched, with a triumphant eye, as she strutted into my little private domain. My muscles tightened; but I was determined to be friendly. So, when Pauline started eating out of my pan, I gave her one side to herself. I started eating out of the other side.

She didn't like that. She scolded me and gave me a sharp peck on the head. She repeated this treatment, gave me a hostile squawk, and started to peck me a third time. Then I pushed her —gently—and she stepped back with an angry squall, and turned my water pan over.

"Why you dirty dog!" Henrietta screamed. "Look what you did. You're a mean cur, that's what you are. Don't you touch Pauline. Come here . . . Come *here!*"

I didn't want to come. She had that brass curtain rod again. *"Come here!"*

Whimpering, I came. She meant business, all right. She gave me four

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ugly smacks across the rear, and I went limping and yowling off into the corner. She threatened to beat me some more if I didn't shut up. "Do you want all the neighbors to know you got a whipping?"

The pain was dreadful. I moaned as low as I could.

WHEN Henrietta went to clean up the mess she got a surprise from Pauline. I guess that arrogant bird thought herself a privileged character by this time, in full possession of the house. When Henrietta touched the food pan, Pauline gave her an awful peck on the hand. You should have heard who wailed and carried on and called names then.

My beating of that day laid me up for a long time. Henrietta told everyone that a car must have struck me. She told it so often that Pauline picked it up.

"Car hit him," she would chatter. "Car—car—car—hit him." That became her stock phrase for me in the months that followed—my greeting from her every time I limped across the room.

It was a bad limp and it stayed with me. Poor Jack, he couldn't understand how so smart a dog could walk into the path of a car.

All in all, our household was divided against itself. I could mention dozens of times when only Jack's endless patience, or his stern warnings to me to help keep the peace, kept some obstreperous female—human or bird—from getting hurt. I'll mention only one:

Jack was away on business for three days. For three days Henrietta neglected to feed me as he had instructed her to do. By the third day I was really hungry. Inside I was a turmoil of restless and wild anixety for the taste of meat. And there, not three feet from where I lay, Pauline strutted back and forth. She was fat from good care. She was within reach—and her mistress was away in the other room conversing with someone at the door.

And nothing happened. I had made my promise to Jack, and I kept it.

THE accident was one of those freakish, fantastic things that would make any scientist sit up and take notice. Only in this case no scientist got in on it. Nobody got in on it but Jack and I—and we would never tell.

The accident happened on the grounds of the Ralston Chemical Plant. It was really no one's fault. We had accepted a lift from a friend, and on our way we had driven a couple of extra blocks to leave a message at this chemical plant. He left us in the car, parked in a narrow alley between two buildings while he went on his errand. So there we happened to be sitting when the explosion occurred.

That was on June the 8th. You may remember reading about it in the newspapers. If so, you'll recall that a wall collapsed; that 7000 cubic feet of an unnamed gas was released; and that eighteen tons of an unnamed chemical powder spilled down over the alley. The mixture of materials coming together in this moment of concussion resulted in a very strange explosion. It was miraculous, according to these newspaper accounts, that there were no casualties. For right in the middle of the explosion was a car occupied by Jack R. Mobert, of 4420 Ellis Avenue, and his dog. The windows of the car were blown *out*, otherwise the damages consisted of the chemical plant's loss of material, whose value was a military secret.

But that wasn't all, not by a long shot. *My* version of the story would have given those chemists and reporters something to write about.

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Unfortunately, as Jack has noted, a dog can't talk, no matter how much it may understand.

When the explosion struck, all I could do was bark. There was a terrifying clatter of glass. It blew out. The white dust blew in. It sprayed all over us, like a flour mill bursting. The car doors blew open. And I distinctly remember that for an instant there was a purple blaze everywhere.

My instincts told me to grab Jack by the coat tail and get him out of there the quickest way. I whirled to the front seat.

Even now, as I think of that awful moment, I recall what a heaviness, what an awkwardness I felt, jumping from the rear seat to the front, through the suffocating white dust cloud.

There was no coat tail. No coat! *No Jack Mobert!*

In the front seat there wasn't anyone—except a yellow dog that looked to be part collie, part spaniel, part pointer, and the rest assorted.

I barked at it and it gave me a strange look, *and spoke.* It didn't bark, it spoke in perfect English, and in a very familiar voice. "Where'd you come from? What happened? What happened to *me? Ye gods!*"

THE voice from the dog's mouth was Jack's. The dog, too, was perfectly familiar in every detail. I should know, as often as I've passed myself in Henrietta's full length mirror. That dog was either me or some forgotten twin brother.

It said, "This is all wrong. I don't understand it. Let's get out of here before they find us."

Who should I be to question my master's voice, even if it did come from the mouth of a dog? I answered, with a quick and conclusive "Bow-wow," and out the doors we went. My stars, but I was awkward.

I was heavy, bulky, soggy with such weight as I'd never known. And yet, in my strong hind legs I felt a certain new freedom of balance. *I was walking on my hind legs, with no strain.*

Out of the cloud of dust I saw. *I was wearing clothes.* Jack's clothes. And they fit me. No wonder this dog with the voice of Jack a staring at me so. *I had assumed his body. He had passed into mine.*

We understood each other at once.

"Come on, Solomon," he said, his collie nose turning sharp for a way out of trouble. We ran.

It was shocking, yet ludicrous. Two or three times I bounced down on all fours from an uncomfortable feeling that I was riding too high in the air. My eyes weren't used to such elevation.

We reached the street, and a taxi came past, and Jack jumped up on his hind legs and waved a paw at it. The driver didn't see him. Jack turned to me and said, "Why can't these taxi drivers keep their eyes open? Say, wait a minute." He looked at his forepaw. Then he looked up at me, and I knew he was laughing. His canine face wore the same expression I always wore when I laughed.

Now I began to wiggle the fingers of my hands. What wonderful, facile hands. No wonder Jack could write with a pencil, and tie knots, and make change with coins, and do a thousand other things that I couldn't begin to do.

Well, the hands were mine, now, and as Jack looked up at me, laughing, I gave him another "Bow-wow-wow" of understanding. Yes, I would have to hail the taxis now. And make the change with the coins. And do a thousand other things that Jack could no longer do—until we found our way out of this trouble.

"Oh-oh, Solomon," Jack said. His

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jaw dropping in dejection and his tail drooped. "This is going to be tough on you when you have to face Henrietta. You poor fellow. We'll have to think of something...Can't you talk at all? Try."

"Bow-wow," I said. "Bow-wrowrr-*row!*"

"No, that won't do," said Jack. He lifted a paw and scratched a floppy brown ear. "We'll have to give this matter some thought."

I tried again. "Bow-wowrrr. Bow-wow-wow-wow-*wow.*" That wasn't getting me anywhere and we both knew it. It made me uncomfortable, and for some reason I smeared my hand slowly over my cheek. What a strange experience. This, I remembered, was one of Jack's little habits when he was disturbed. But for me, used to padding around on all fours, it was a weird feeling to find my chin covered with a fine bristle of human whiskers.

"Yes, Solomon, you'll have to shave every morning," said Jack, wagging his tail mischievously. "You'd just as well make up your mind to that and a lot of other things—"

WE HAD been standing there by the curb when we should have been walking. Now from the chemical plant at our rear someone from the crowd that had gathered around the scene of the explosion came toward us, beckoning.

"Were you the man in that car?" he called. He was a well dressed man with a solid, responsible face. Evidently a company official who felt concerned about us. "I say, were you the man—"

"Yes," Jack shouted, right at my side. I opened my mouth to fit his answer.

"Better come back and we'll give you an examination," he called, now only thirty feet away.

"Nobody hurt," Jack shouted. With each word he tapped his paw against my ankle so that I would move my mouth to feign talking.

"It's the company rules," said the man.

"I've got an appointment," Jack yelled. "See you later."

And off we went, me striding on my new long legs, Jack trotting ahead trying to hurry me along. That funny feeling in my newly found jaw and lips and cheeks must have been the feeling of a human laugh. The fact was I felt rather elated at the fanciful notion that *I*, Solomon, alias Drip, was hurrying off to an appointment.

But just then a surly old tom-cat crossed our sidewalk, and on the instant I bounded across the parking to give chase. Then I caught myself. The cat scarcely saw me, but gave a belligerent "Pfft!" and raised a claw at Jack.

Jack didn't even notice it. He was talking to me. "We're near the car line, Solomon. Are you ready with the change?"

All of which was fair warning to me to watch my P's and Q's. I was no longer living in a world of canines and saucy tom-cats. I was the living, moving embodiment of my beloved master. To keep faith with him I mustn't pull any doggish tricks. We came to the intersection, walked with perfect dignity past the lamp post, and boarded the street car.

HENRIETTA was talking on the telephone when we got home. Jack whispered to me, "Get the newspaper and settle down in the big chair. Don't let her catch your eye or she'll know something's wrong. Get me?"

I was scared; still I couldn't help laughing inside to think of myself sitting here reading the newspaper. And poor old Jack, pacing back and forth on the floor—he was so nervous he couldn't sit still.

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Henrietta came in from telephoning. She was in one of her better moods, having just finished scolding the power and light company for making an error on her bill. She may have been wrong about it but she'd had the satisfaction of telling them off. She walked past with a gloating light in her eye, the way a fighting bulldog looks after chasing all the terriers off the street.

She called back from the kitchen, "Well, you might at least be civil and say something."

Jack tapped me with his paw and said, "M-m-m," as if that were enough for a man to say while reading the paper. I was learning fast. I could say, "M-m-m" myself, if that's all it would take to get by.

"That's like you, Jack Mobert," she scoffed. "Nothing to say to your wife who slaves for you all day. But plenty to say to your dog."

"M-m-m," I said.

"I heard you, talking secrets to Drip when you came in. Don't think you're getting away with anything. My Pauline has sharp ears, and she tells me everything...I s'pose you're taking Drip for a walk after supper? Well, I may not be here when you get back."

She came in to face me as she finished her speech. But her eyes followed Jack, who gave a quick look and went on pacing, his tail tucked between his legs.

"Well, now. What's happened to his limp? You can't tell me a dog doesn't put on. He's been doing it all along to work on my sympathies, and now he's forgot—oh-oh, there it is again. *Look* at him limp, would you? He's a sly one, you bet."

"M-m-m," I said.

"I'll surprise you someday and sell him off," Henrietta said.

"Bowrr!" I barked suddenly, then covered it over by putting my hand over my mouth to feign a cough. Jack limped over to my feet and lay down, and I could feel his heart thumping against my ankles. Henrietta watched him skeptically. She shrugged as I started to pet him.

"Well, you lazy dog, do you want your supper or don't you?"

That time she got me. I jumped out of my chair before I thought. But Jack was already limping toward the kitchen sink. And when Pauline poked her head out of the cage and chidded him with a squeaky, "Car—car—car hit him," I breathed a glad sigh and knew we were over the first hump.

SOMEONE else called during supper, and Henrietta returned from the telephone to announce that not only was she going out for the evening: I was going with her. The Laubmanns had invited us over for bridge.

"Stop eating at once and go get dressed," she said. "I never knew you to take so long to a meal. Or make such a mess of it—Jack, for goodness sake, get your mouth away from your plate! You don't have the manners you were born with."

I was so wrought up about everything I hardly knew whether I was coming or going. But Jack led me straight to "my" room and said I was going, no question about it. Laubmann was one of the links between Jack and his boss at the department store.

"You've got to carry on until we find our way out of this jam," Jack said. "You got along fine with your supper. Only I sympathize with you, having to sit there and take all that talk."

Yes, I had got along well at the table, thanks to the well established habits in Jack's body. My hands knew all about handling knives and forks as long as I just let them go their own way. It was only when I'd get excited and forget myself that I'd go wrong—such as when

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I ducked down to grab that last bite of meat with my teeth.

Jack rested one paw on the chair and pointed to the clothes with the other, telling me a hundred and one things I needed to know. I was delighted to see how easy my fingers could button buttons and tie shoe laces.

"Laubmann is the floorwalker in section six, remember. You're next to him in section eight."

I pointed to myself and raised my eyebrows, without any trouble at all, in an attitude of consternation. I began shaking my head and I gave a fierce bark of refusal. My nerve was slipping. The terrors of coming social situations pressed down on me. I started removing my clothes.

"Oh, you can't back out and leave me flat. Not tonight, anyhow. We'll talk about the store later. But tonight—there's nothing to it, Solomon. Just let them talk. You nod your head, and laugh when they laugh—only not loud. Hell, I wish I could go with you, but Henrietta would never stand for that."

SO Mr. and Mrs. Laubmann and Henrietta and I played bridge. Fortunately, I had watched this game through so many dreary hours that I knew how to carry on. And fortunately, when it came my time to shuffle and deal, Jack's expert hands—my hands now—were ready with every motion.

But unfortunately, I didn't actually know the values of any of the cards. By some accident of chance I won one hand, simply by playing blind—although no one knew I was playing blind. After that my luck went to pot. Right away Henrietta jumped on me for deliberately failing to follow suit. I just sat there and didn't say a word.

"Now look what you've done, Henrietta," Mrs. Laubmann said, very sympathetically. "You've offended him so he won't even speak."

"Oh, he gets those silent spells," said Henrietta. "Think nothing of it."

"Well, he doesn't have much chance to talk around you and me, does he, Henrietta?" said Mr. Laubmann, who evidently prided himself on being a great talker. He and Henrietta rambled on, all through two more hands, and I was beginning to breathe again with the hope that I was entirely forgotten. But my blind playing ruined the game for them, and Henrietta flew off the handle and upset the table.

"That's the last time I'll ever play bridge with you, you fool," she said, and walked off into another room. I picked a newspaper. Mr. Laubmann picked up the cards. Mrs. Laubmann went after a tray of tea and cookies. Then Henrietta came back and we were all around the table again.

"You *are* pretty silent tonight, Jack," Laubmann said. "Working too hard? ...No?...You still think you should have that raise, I suppose?..."

I shook my head, giving him all the no's and yes's he needed to keep going. But presently he said:

"What did the boss say the last time you asked him for that raise?"

I shrugged—not because I meant to but because a lot of funny feelings were gathering up in my throat.

Laubmann said, "That's about the same answer he gave me." And he was off again with more talk. And I sat there frozen, realizing for the first time that human beings must undergo a strange lot of pain called embarrassment that dogs don't know much about. Was it possible that I was going to get through the evening without being caught.

WHEN Mrs. Laubmann came back with another tray of tea and sandwiches I didn't see the pet that must

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have followed her in. Mr. Laubmann was giving me a funny story at the moment, and I could tell by his manner that he was confident he was bringing me out of my bad mood.

Suddenly I glanced aside, and there stood a big chow, all puffed up in his red fur. He glared at me and let out with an insulting, "Brwowrrr!"

On the impulse I gave it back to him in double measure. "Brwowrr! Brwowrrrr!"

Talk of the pain of human embarrassment! What I didn't learn about it then and there could well be postponed for some future lesson. Mrs. Laubmann laughed fit to kill. Mr. Laubmann guffawed. And even Henrietta broke into a giggle of genuine amusement such as I had never heard before.

Then Laubmann said, "That's one way to keep these canines tamed—growl back at them. How'd you do that, Jack?"

Henrietta's eyes were wide with curiosity. "Well, I never heard you do that before. You've been taking lessons from Drip."

Then it dawned on me that I hadn't spilled the beans at all. They thought I'd barked to be clever, that I'd just pulled out of my bad humor.

"Come on, do it again," Laubmann said. "Don't be bashful."

I shrugged, then nodded, swelled up my chest, and let them have another deep-throated, "Brwowrrrr!" Everybody laughed again, and the chow looked at me with great admiration.

"It's a swell imitation," said Laubmann. Then he tried it but had no luck at all. The chow shook his red coat in disgust and walked out of the room.

Well, they wouldn't let me stop it—thank goodness. Laubmann said it was the hit of the evening—yes, the prize gem of wit, the way I'd come back at the chow so quick. What was more, he said he was going to tell the boss, the first chance he got, that Jack Mobert was a versatile fellow and a man of talent, with a hobby of imitating animal calls. Could I imitate a donkey?

"Brwowrrr! Wowrrr!" I said.

They all laughed again. Then Mrs. Laubmann brought us our hats and we said good-night—all but me. I barked. The Laubmanns laughed again, but not too much. Then the door closed after us.

I guessed what was coming now. Henrietta could hardly wait until she got me out of hearing. Then she pounced on me with hard words. What did I mean by dragging that joke in the dust. Couldn't I be satisfied with one laugh and let to go at that. It was disgusting the way I carried on. Well, what did I have to say for myself?

"Bow-wow," I said timidily.

That made her so mad she started raving. She went over all my faults. She gave me a speech that she'd worn thin on poor old Jack many times before. And every time she paused for breath I gave her another "Bow-wow!"

Finally she got so insanely angry she blew up and quit. She wouldn't speak another word to me. When we got to the house she went straight to her room and slammed the door. Which was quite all right with me.

I FOUND poor Jack snoozing under the sink. He stretched and yawned and looked so contented that I could have wept. Poor old boy, you just knew a quiet evening at home had done him worlds of good.

He came to me, wagging his tail, and jumped all over me with affection. I sat down, he curled up on the chair with me, and we talked heart to heart.

"I wish you could tell me everything that happened," he said. "You got along fine, I'm sure. Did anyone suspect you

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weren't me?"

I shook my head.

"Good boy," he said. "Now I'll tell you what I've been thinking. I can't do this to you—it isn't fair."

I gave a low bark of surprise. Did he admit I had the worst end of the bargain?

"When that accident hit us," he said, "and I finally realized that we'd traded bodies, all at once I was filled with a strange secret joy...You understand? ...It was because of Henrietta. Instantly I thought, Hooray, I'm free from her! I'm a dog—she won't know me—and I'll be free! That's what I thought. But that was a selfish thing for me to think."

I never saw a dog's face with a more generous expression. Jack had fought this thing out in his conscience. He wanted to come clean.

"You were swell to take over for me," he said. "You might have walked out on the deal, and she might have called the cops to round you up, and we'd have had a mess of trouble on our hands... But I can't let you go on. It's too much sacrifice to ask, giving up your doghood to take on my troubles."

I waited in silence. Did he have any earthly idea how we could unscramble ourselves—or did he have some other plan?

"No, Solomon, I don't know what we're going to do. Maybe we'll have to run away together...Are you willing to stay with me for a day or two or three? And hold down my job for me?"

THE next morning Jack and I left before breakfast. He helped me through the ordeal of punching the time clock, and got me placed at my station before the people began to come. Then he wished me the best of luck and made his exit by the alley. (I trembled to wonder whether he'd meet a gang of rowdy terriers; but right away I had troubles of my own.)

A hundred or so clerks gave me a "Good morning, Mr. Mobert," as they swept past. Since no one waited for an answer I had only to nod and give a low, "Wrrf."

Someone said, "I hope your cold isn't serious, Mr. Mobert."

She was a rather pretty lady and she seemed disappointed that I didn't warm up and talk a little. Even so, her sweet and somewhere intimate smile had a noticeable affect upon this body of Jack's —a tingling sensation of interest. Automatically my eyes followed her as she hurried down the aisle. And I thought to myself, how strangely pleasing it is to be a man in the presence of an attractive woman (not Henrietta)!

Other persons kindly asked about my cold. Through Jack's foresight I had pinned a handkerchief around my throat. This, together with another dodge or two, enabled me to beg out of talking or handling any complex business.

The customers were soon flowing past, a continuous parade that was to last all day. To me it was one long, never-ending riddle, sometimes funny, sometimes frightening, always complicated.

"Books, please." (I pointed to the right.) "Which way to the toy department?" (I pointed to the esculator.) "Do you have silk underwear?" (I shook my head violently.) "I'd like this package wrapped, please." I scowled. Was I supposed to wrap it? I thought it safer to point to the basement: Jack had said there was a little of everything in the basement.) "The ad says your socks are one third off today. Where can I find them?" (This made me glance at my feet to see if mine were still on.) "Do you have anything for dogs?" (For some reason that one made me blush.)

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Somehow I got along, thanks to Jack's sharp eyes that I was wearing, also to my memory of places and things from the nights I'd helped him with inventories. Somehow I kept the customers moving.

When clerks came to have me okay the purchases of credit customers, I pretended that my right arm was sprained and motioned them on to another floorwalker.

TWO weeks later I was still at it—still suffering from a very lame arm—which I avoided explaining, owing to a very sore throat. Meanwhile I was learning to use my doggish growl to advantage, conservatively, of course.

That bit of growl got some of the clerks. They began to whisper around that I'd turned terribly grouchy all at once. They ceased to waste any time on pleasantries with me.

Soon I was called into the office, and I thought, Oh-oh, this is where Jack Mobert gets his head chopped off.

The boss, not I, did the talking.

"Mr. Mobert, your attitude has grown noticeably more severe recently. While we're not asking you to be too harsh, we can't help observing that the efficiency of the salesfolk in your section has picked up. We are giving you a fifteen dollar raise."

I swallowed a bark, nodded, and walked out. This would be a happy surprise for Jack. Not that he had any use for money, snoozing on a mat under the sink; but it was the principle of the thing. However, then and there I vowed I would never spoil the pleasure of this raise by confiding that my growl swung it.

Meanwhile Jack was finding it pretty lonesome, being a dog. He didn't take any interest in those cute little cocker spaniels a few doors up the street. He was worrying more than any dog should worry, and could hardly wait till I got home to tell me all the things that had got on his nerves.

"She kept talking to the milkman this morning until she soured his milk." Or, "She got mad at the grocer on Forty-third Street, and when she got home she called someone on the telephone and rehearsed the whole conversation. That didn't satisfy her, so she called another and another, and laid out that grocer worse each time."

Jack had other dog trouble, too, such as fleas, and quarrels with Pauline over who should eat his food. But these were minor troubles that Henrietta put a stop to.

One night I came home to find the light of victory in his eyes, and as soon as we got out for a walk where no one would hear, he gave me the juicy low-down.

"That brat of a parrot," he said, laughing as he hopped up on the park bench, "I certainly gave her the surprise of her life today. You know how careful we've been to keep out of her sight when we talk. Well, she's been intolerably arrogant over the fact that parrots can talk and dogs can't. I've never let her hear me speak a word. But today, while Henrietta was out, she opened up on me with all her hard-boiled words. She called me a dirty cur. I glared at her. She thought she was getting my goat. She said it over about fifty times, getting louder and louder.

"Suddenly I jumped up on the table—yes, I know that's forbidden, but I'd had enough. I barred my teeth at her and then I began. I called her all the names in the catalog. The instant I began to talk you should have seen her feathers jump. Before I got through they were drooping."

Jack's feelings were running high. He gave a strange laugh. "You know," he added, "if I were a dog, and I got real

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hungry, and that bird got in my way—"

He didn't finish, because a trio of canines came bounding across the park just then. He leaped down and ran over to get acquainted. But I knew what he had left unsaid. I was a dog, at heart, and I still felt that way about Pauline the parrot. For all I had dressed in clothes, made change, carried keys, punched time clocks, and ridden street cars, *at heart I still had that ferocious desire to devour that bird.*

JACK'S blast of name-calling proved to be the beginning of the end. Talk about dogs putting on an act! That parrot took on with such an air of dejection and utter defeat that Henrietta actually called three doctors. Finally she came to the conclusion that Pauline was ill from distraught nerves.

"It's that cur of yours," Henrietta said to me. "You used to call Drip an intelligent dog. If he's got an ounce of brains, why can't he think of something to do besides tormenting my Pauline?"

I didn't answer. Henrietta took for granted that I simply wasn't speaking to her these days; that I had a grouch on against the world. Now she tried to get an answer out of me. I thought better of it, and the next thing you know I was dodging a volley of teacups.

The next night I came home to find Jack missing.

"I sent him to the dog pound," Henrietta said. "I couldn't stand him any longer. He was too suspicious, watching me all the time, and getting on poor Pauline's nerve. Maybe she'll talk again, now that he's gone. . . Now don't start putting on such a long face. I tell you he's gone. I put him in the wagon myself. Nobody will ever see him again —and good riddance."

In that moment I knew what it was to be a mad dog. I was one. On the surface I might be the patient, easy-going Jack Mobert—but down inside me I was all savage.

I broke the cage open and grabbed Pauline by the throat. I choked off her squawks and sank my teeth into her flesh. I tore her saucy head off with my hands. I was seeing red, thinking of Jack, realizing what Henrietta had done—and I was all savage and murderous inside—a wild, mad dog, that's what I was—a savage, wild, mad dog. I sank my teeth into Pauline's flesh. I spit feathers.

Henrietta screamed. But her scream broke off when she heard me growl, the sharp, savage growl of a wild, angry dog. She ran to the door before she screamed again. The neighbors must have heard. They must have heard me, too, growling and barking like a timber wolf over its pray.

They came rushing in, and one of them had a gun. But no one did any shooting. They just stood and stared; for all they seemed to see was Jack Mobert munching on a parrot, letting the feathers fall where they would.

I grew calmer as I finished. I didn't growl, much less speak. Henrietta was at the telephone now, calling a lawyer about an immediate divorce. Yes, her husband had gone insane. She had plenty of witnesses. . .

At the divorce court there were whispers that Jack Mobert had been insane for days; no one could remember just when he last spoke. Some of them added that it was a wonder he hadn't gone off his nut long ago, considering what he lived with.

The proceedings were at an end at last. The ordeal had cost me so much head shaking that my neck was stiff. Then something I saw made my whole body rigid. Henrietta saw, too. The judge told her three times to step down, she was a free woman—and she didn't seem to hear.

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She was watching the yellowish brown dog that came padding up the aisle of the court room, its brown ears flopping in a carefree manner.

She pointed. "That's—that's Drip, Drip, I thought you were dead. I sent you——"

She broke off. The dog was *speaking*, and in the presence of courtroom witnesses. (There were those who would always say it was a mirror trick; others who would aver that a ventriloquist accomplished it.)

"I would have been dead, thanks to you," the dog said, "but I talked my way out of it."

Henrietta was almost too breathless to talk. "You—you sound like my husband—my *ex*-husband!"

"To be married to you," said Jack, "shouldn't happen to a dog."

Then he whistled at me, and I barked at him, and we raced out together as free as uncaged beasts. I hailed a taxi and he called the destination. And so, with one accord, we sped on our way to the chemical plant to see what, if anything might be done about us.

DESCENT INTO HELL

By A. MORRIS

THE greatest mystery of the Universe lies under our very feet. It may seem strange, well-nigh unbelievable, but although the men of science have explored the regions which hold the sun, the stars, and encompass hundreds of millions of miles they know almost nothing about the center of the earth. When you stop to consider the fact that this planet has a diameter of only 8,000 miles, there is great reason to wonden why more cannot be known about it.

Plans have been conceived in the minds of modern scientists whereby the vast inner earth region can be studied. To forge ahead with those plans, men must defy all the laws of nature, construct artificially cooled shafts, and invent new types of clothing to protect their human bodies from unestimated pressure and temperatures within the bowels of the Earth.

The tremendous heat imprisoned within the Earth presents the toughest problem that science must overcome. Almost all substances known to mankind would melt in the merciless inferno that rages 30 miles down. As we descend closer to the center the heat becomes greater. Some of the world's leading scientists and engineers including the late Sir Charles A. Parsons, and also John L. Hodgson have publicly voiced their confidence in modern engineering and its ability to overcome what may seem to be the impossible. They laid the plans for a series of permanent scientific laboratories extending at least three miles into the center of the earth.

Can we picture in our minds what will be taking place in the realm of scientific discovery but a few years hence? The men at work far from the troubles of our everyday world will be clothed in suits somewhat resembling those now worn by deep sea divers. In their thick helmets and strange clothing made out of lightweight metals especially contrived to resist pressure and heat, they will certainly make a queer looking sight! The subterranean chamber in which they will be working will necessarily be refrigerated, and the red-hot rock surrounding it will perhaps issue threatening hissing sounds from the huge jets of steam provoked by the meeting of hot and cold materials.

Here men from the various fields of science will work together to solve the mystery of this hidden Hell. The geologists will be making tests to determine whether the continents are shifting their position; the astronomers will be delving into the problem of the earth's origin; and physicists will be trying to discover new ways of using the power imprisoned within the atom. The biologists will be found at work here also, pondering upon the effect of the absence of the rays of the sun on living creatures to make use of this new information in the fight to eliminate disease and prolong life among men.

What will these new gains mean to you and I? What will the daring, the courage of the dauntless men of science achieve for us in their descent into the Hell that is the center of our Earth. Man may be able to find out how to control the vast powers of the tossing seas, the endless oceans that cover such a great portion of the earth's surface. The now death-dealing volcanoes and disastrous earthquakes will one way be predicted with accuracy and made useful. Perhaps all the power needed to run the machines of civilization will be derived from the heat that is generated by nature's forces in the center of the earth, the Hell upon which we walk so casually.

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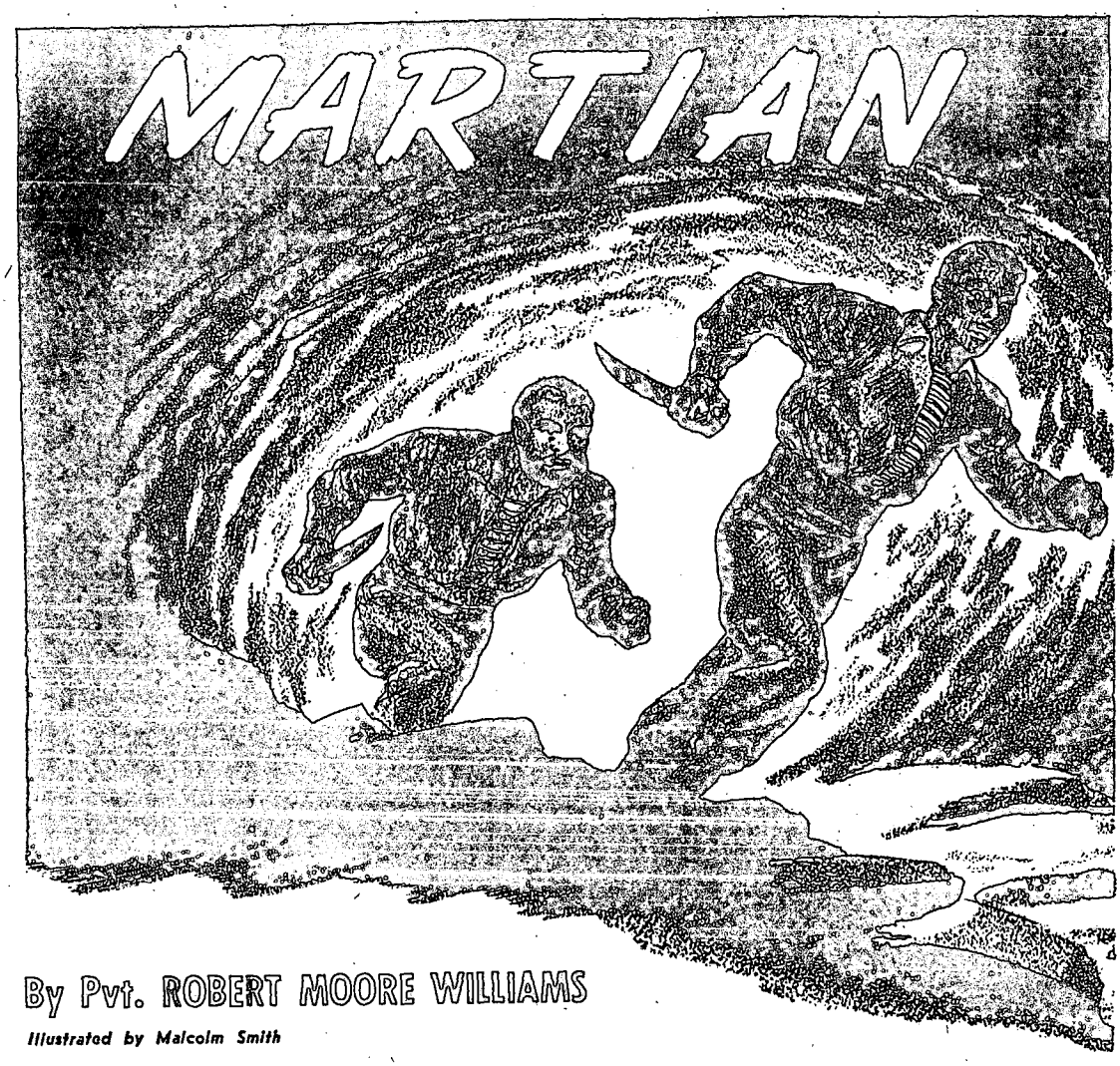
MARTIAN



By Pvt. ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Illustrated by Malcolm Smith

Born into a land of forgotten men, Harden lived only to escape. Then, with that accomplished, he fought to go back again

"CRIPES, it's Harden!" Keogh gasped.

"Yeah," Harden said. "But take it easy. I didn't know *you* were boss of this outfit, and besides I'm here on business—"

He got no farther. Keogh, in a manner surprising for his bulk, lifted himself from behind the desk and darted through the door at the back. As he moved, the Martian glow lamps, reacting to his mental command, flickered and went out. The room was plunged into darkness.

As Harden turned, he was reaching inside his coat for the gun nestled in its holster there. The gun slid smoothly into his hand, a flat, compact little

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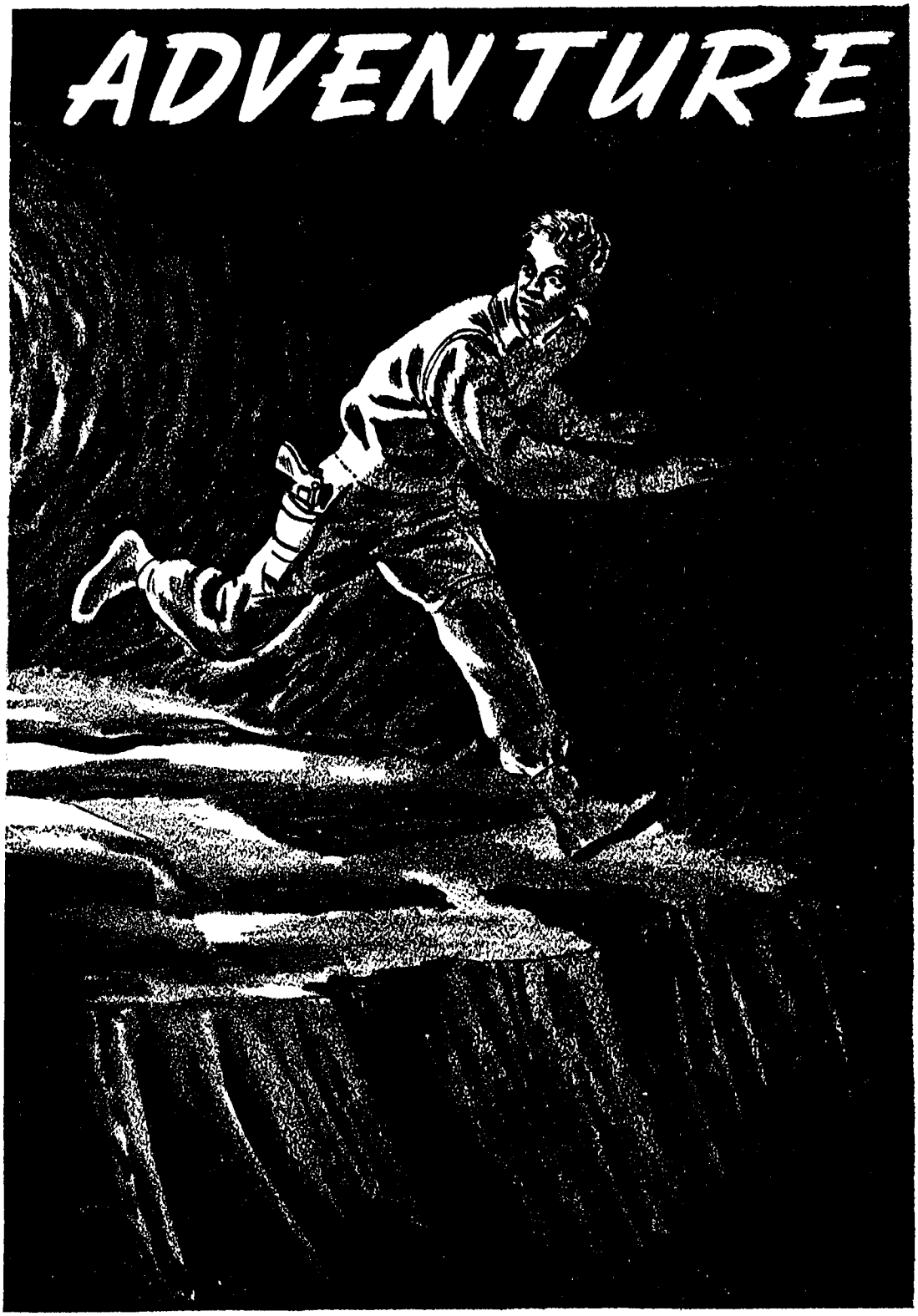

Panic-stricken, he plunged along the tunnel, heedless of what lay in his path

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weapon that fired a tiny sliver of steel much like a phonograph needle of the old days. The gun was actuated by a powerful spring and was almost silent in operation, a tiny *ping* being the only noise when it was fired. As to what happened when one of the needles hit you, that depended on the charge the needle carried. It might be anything from sudden death to unconsciousness within ten seconds. The needles in the magazine of the gun that Harden carried were loaded with thirty minutes of blissful sleep.

"Open!" he said.

The door did not budge. When he had entered, it had opened to his command. Or that was what he thought when he entered. He realized now that Keogh, hearing his voice, had ordered the door to open. The sensitive operating mechanism was tuned to Keogh's mental commands.

"Damn!"

He dropped into a crouch, intending to drive his shoulder at the door. The knife whistled as it passed over his head, hit the door with a metallic clang. If he had been standing erect, it would have hit him between the shoulder blades.

Harden fired without moving, aiming at the back door through which Keogh had made his hasty exit. One thing was certain: Keogh had not thrown that knife. A Martian had done that. The Martians were experts with knives, preferring them to any other weapon. Too often Harden had seen them bring down small game with a thrown knife for him to doubt their expertness with a stiletto. He held his breath and waited.

There was a sigh and a soft thump. "Sleep tight!" Harden thought grimly. He turned again to the door. Something that flew through the air like a great bird hit him in the middle of the back, sent him sprawling blindly, almost knocking the breath out of him.

As skinny, leathery arms went around his neck and a six-fingered hand began to search hurriedly for his throat, he knew what had happened. There had been two Martians. The needle from his gun had got one of them. The other had calmly waited, then had launched himself at Harden in the darkness.

Harden had been trained in a hard school. There had been more rough and tumble fighting in his life than books, more death and danger than afternoon teas. He could not remember a time when anything except the keenness of his wits and the quickness of his hand and eye stood between him and death. The Martian was on his back, feeling for his throat. He lifted himself to his feet, fell backward heavily. The Martian clawed like a cat, trying to get out from under. He didn't quite make it. With satisfaction Harden heard the Martian grunt heavily. With more satisfaction he felt the fingers relax around his throat. A second later the Martian was discovering how it felt to be strangled.

WHEN the Martian was quiet, Harden felt for his gun, dropped in the struggle. The feel of the cool little weapon was reassuring. He sat on the floor, the gun trained on the back door and waited. The Martian that he had throttled breathed heavily, grunted as air and consequent consciousness began to return. Harden took careful aim at the sound. The little weapon *pinged*. The Martian grunted again, then sighed. He would be all right in half an hour. In the meantime sleep was the thing for him.

Harden listened. Oddly, the rat warren of a house was quiet. The normal noises of the streets, the cries of

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the sandnut venders, the shrill yells of the perfume hawkers—Martians loved perfume—did not penetrate here. Harden did not like this quietness. It was likely to break with explosive violence at any second.

The silence broke. But not with violence. The front door squeaked gently and swung open. The glow lamps in the hall were burning. Light from them streamed into the room.

A girl stood there in the door. And what a girl! She had red hair and green eyes. A white fur was around her throat. She was clutching a large white purse in two firm little hands.

She peered into the darkened room.

"Keogh?" she said.

"He went fishing," Harden said.

"Fishing? On Mars?" She could not see who had spoken.

"Yes," Harden said. "And if you will take my advice, you will go fishing, too, pronto!"

"Who—"

"Please stand to one side," Harden said. "The rush around here is likely to be terrific at any moment."

He stepped forward, intending to pass her and get to hell out of this place. For the first time she saw the Martian on the floor. Apparently she thought the Willie was dead. She uttered a frightened little squeak and her hand dived into her purse.

Gently but firmly Harden took the spring gun out of her hands. "Tut, tut," he said. "This is Mars. Mustn't shoot people here or the Willies will kick you — kerplunk — into what they call the land of serenity."

"But—"

"Nice day," Harden said. "Glad to have met you and all that. But really I must be on my way. If you care to stick around, I'm sure Keogh will show eventually, but I can't guarantee what kind of a humor he will be in. He was pretty jumpy, the last I saw of him."

She did not attempt to keep him from passing through the door. He stepped into the short hall. It was jammed almost full of packing cases. To the left, it took a tortuous turn and dived out of sight. If you went that way you would eventually reach the street, after you had passed through several rooms. Harden turned to the left.

The lights went out.

"Uh huh," he said. "I was afraid of that."

THE place was as black as a tunnel in a coal mine. Mentally he cursed all Martians forever for building their houses without windows or skylights. He knew the cold and the dust accounted for this method of construction and he recognized the necessity for it, but it was damned inconvenient for a human who was trying to get out of one of the places, especially when the darned lighting system was responsive to a wish—somebody else's wish, in this case. He was aware that the girl was clutching his arm.

"Sister," he said, "I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but I know you're in damned bad company."

"I came here to talk to Keogh," she snapped. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

"The company I am referring to is myself," Harden said. "If Keogh finds you with me, he is not likely to ask questions."

"Oh! Are you and Keogh enemies?"

"Well, we're not exactly friends."

"Then how did you happen to be here?"

"I didn't know the man I was coming to see was Keogh," Harden explained. "He didn't seem to know that the man who was coming to see him was me, either, but he recognized me

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fast enough. After that, things sort of started to happen. But enough of this. If it can be conveniently arranged, I would like to get out of here alive."

Her grip tightened on his arm.

"Is it as bad as that?" she questioned. "I mean, will you be killed if you're caught?"

"I'm not planning to be caught."

"I mean— Listen, there is no reason why Keogh won't let me out. He doesn't know me. All I have to do is go to the front and yell who I am. I'm sure I won't be bothered. Then, when I get outside I can call the police to rescue you."

It was a good plan, presuming she was telling the truth and presuming Keogh would actually let her out. There was only one thing wrong with the plan.

"It's nice of you to offer to help, but I'm afraid I am not very anxious to be rescued, by the police."

"Why not?"

"There are several reasons," Harden said. "One reason is that the police would take my fingerprints."

"Oh, I see. It's like that, is it?"

"Sort of like that," Harden admitted.

"Are you a criminal?"

"The police think I am. But, as I said before, enough of this. I'm going to try to get out of this joint. You can come with me or you can stay here and finish your business with Keogh, when he returns; whatever," he delicately hinted, "your business was."

He could not see her but he could hear her breathing in the darkness. He felt her take her hand from his arm. She had made her decision then. She was going to remain here. Well, that was good sound sense. If she went with him, she was taking a chance of getting killed, but if she remained here Keogh would probably not harm her. Harden was a little sorry she was not going with him. There was something about this girl that he liked. He moved silently toward the rear.

"Wait a minute," she whispered.

"Why?" he questioned.

"I'm going with you!"

"Good girl," Harden said. "Here's your gun." He pressed the little weapon into her hand. "You'll probably need it."

LIKE two mice in a house full of hungry cats, they slipped silently to the rear. Here Harden had noticed a stairway leading to the second floor. Somewhere up on that second floor there ought to be a ladder leading to a trapdoor through the roof. The Martians always built their houses this way. Harden was hoping to reach the roof, then either drop to the ground or jump across to the roof of the neighboring structure. He got one foot on the first step when it happened.

Willies seemed to boil out of everywhere. All along Harden had known that the dark was no protection for the reason that the Martians could sense the presence of a human being near them. The knife whistled as it went past his ear, thudded home in the wall. He jerked the girl down, fired blindly into the darkness. He heard her gun pinging away beside him. They were shooting at every sound they heard. They didn't hear the three Martians come down the stairs, because the Willies, sensing the presence of the two humans on the steps, jumped down feet first. The girl squealed.

Simultaneously other Martians came charging from the darkness. Keogh was apparently not risking his valuable skin, at least while he had Willies to do the dirty work.

Harden struck out with his fists. In the darkness a Martian grunted as the bare knuckles somehow went home. He

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tripped over Harden, fell headfirst into the group at the foot of the steps. They gave him a royal welcome.

"Are you all right?" Harden hissed.

"Y-yes," the girl answered doubtfully.

"Then upstairs, quick, before Keogh thinks to turn on the lights."

There were still two Willies on the stairs but they did not know exactly what was going on. They could sense the presence of the humans but they could not tell exactly where the man and the woman were. They hesitated. Harden grabbed one of them by the legs, swung him in a somersault over his head. He hit with a thud in the middle of the conflict raging below. The girl's gun pinged sharply. Harden caught the third Willie as he fell. One of the needles from the girl's gun had got to him and he was already starting his siesta. He added fresh confusion down below.

The two groups of Willies, those coming down the steps and those charging from the first floor, had not recognized each other quick enough. It was a mistake they would not long continue to make, but by the time they had discovered their error, Harden and the girl were up the stairs.

A dim light was burning on the second floor. They dived through the first door they saw, the hidden control mechanism of the door reacting to Harden's mental command to open.

Two minutes later they were on the roof. The white stars of Mars were above them. The cool wind drifting in from the deserts blew past them.

"Are you all right?" Harden questioned.

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm all right," the girl answered. "But I'll do." She was blushing and he saw the reason why. Her skirt had been torn straight down the middle.

"Think nothing of it, lady, think nothing of it."

Half an hour later, in a little cafe ran by a wanderer from earth, with two glasses of the sparkling wine of the Red Planet before them, Harden said:

"And now, lady, if you don't mind my asking, why in the devil did you ever go to see Ben Keogh?"

CHAPTER II

The Girl from Earth

SHE looked him in the eyes, mentally estimating him, weighing him, judging him. She saw a face browned and burned by the hot sun of space, gray eyes that could laugh with you or look through you, as the owner chose. The eyes were laughing now. There was a scar along the left cheek, an old scar.

"Who are you?" she said.

He laughed. "Ladies first. Who are *you?*"

"Marion Gray," she answered promptly, so promptly that he knew she was not telling the truth.

"And what are you doing on Mars?"

"I landed on the last liner from earth."

"Ah. Purpose?"

"I'm a sociologist working on my Ph.D from Chicago University. I'm doing a thesis on Martian customs and I came here to get material. Is that sufficient?"

Harden laughed. He was enjoying this girl. She had an answer for every question. The trouble was, she had the answer right on the tip of her tongue.

"Don't you believe me?" she demanded.

"Sure," he answered. "Joe! Bring the telephone."

THE Martian radiotelephone, a complicated little gadget, was brought

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to their table. He consulted the directory, punched the proper buttons. A voice speaking with the nasal twang of Mars answered. Harden answered in the same language, waited while the clerk on the other end of the connection hunted for the information he wanted. Eventually he got a reply. Punching the shut-off button, he sat silently regarding the instrument.

"Well, are you satisfied?" the girl demanded.

"That was the space port," Harden said. "They keep careful records of such things. They said that the last ship from earth brought a Marion Gray, who was here to do research on Martian customs." He grinned at her. "What," he asked, "is a Ph.D.?"

"You mean you've never heard of a Ph.D?"

"Nope."

"Where did you go to school?"

"The mining camps of Ganymede," Harden answered. "The stink holes of Venus."

"But—" she said doubtfully, "do they have schools in those places?"

"That's the catch," Harden said. "They don't."

She did not seem to be satisfied with his answer. "But, when you were a boy on Earth, didn't you go to school?"

"I've never been on Earth."

"You've never been on Earth! You're kidding me now."

"Am I?" Harden answered.

"Who are you?"

He hesitated. There was such a thing as talking too much, especially to a woman. But, he liked this girl. He wondered if she had ever heard his name before. "Bruce Harden," he said.

He watched her closely. Her face showed nothing. If she recognized his name, she was a clever actress and could keep herself under complete control.

"You still haven't told me," he said, "why a person looking for material for a Ph.D. would be going to see Ben Keogh. He's not a Martian, you know."

WHY had she gone to see Keogh? That was the important question. Keogh was not openly a crook but that was because he managed to keep his activities secret. He was one of the vast numbers of adventurers from earth who operated on the shady side of the law, who, when space travel had been invented, had invaded the worlds of space, seeking loot from conquered peoples. To their annoyance they found that Mars had not been conquered, that earthmen were tolerated there, and nothing more. Mars was run by the Martians, very much so. The Red Planet was ruled by Martian law, and while earthmen were welcome whether they came to trade, to visit, or just to look at the strange wonders of the world in the sky, the horde of get-rich-quick artists who had descended here had not found the Martians easy pickings. If any looting was to be done, the Martians felt perfectly competent to do it themselves. Keogh and his kind had found the competition tough.

"I'll tell you why I went to see him if you will tell me what the fight was about," Marion Gray said.

"Touche!" Harden wryly answered.

"Well, what were you fighting about?" she demanded, when he showed no signs of answering.

"I told you—because Keogh recognized me."

"Um. That doesn't say anything."

"I didn't intend for it to. The truth is, I knew Keogh on Ganymede three years ago. We had a difference of opinion about certain matters. After he left Ganymede, I forgot all about him. I didn't know he was on Mars and I

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certainly didn't know he was the man I was supposed to see about—ah—"

"About what?"

"You are a very curious person," Harden observed.

"My feminine instincts account for it. Why were you fighting?"

"I don't know why Keogh was trying to do me in. Personally, I was only trying to save my own neck."

"But it doesn't seem reasonable that he would try to kill you like that. Murder is a serious offense. Keogh must have had some reason for his actions."

"How right you are!" Harden said. Ever since the fight had started he had been wondering why Keogh had tried to kill him. Their previous relations had not been pleasant but there had been nothing between them to justify murder. Meeting, they might pass each other like stiff-legged dogs growling at each other, but that ought to have been all. "Personally, I think Keogh is working some kind of a lucrative racket. When he saw me, he thought I was trying to horn in. Therefore—"

"Are you the kind of person who would declare yourself in on a racket?"

"Keogh would think so because that is what *he* would try to do if he was in my place."

"Oh. But you still haven't told me why you went to see him."

"Nor do I intend to tell you," Harden answered. This was his secret. It had brought him back to Mars from Venus, across the wide stretches of space. It had brought him to a planet where he was in mortal danger. For years he had dreamed of the time when he might come back here and do what he was resolved to do. "Secrets are only secret when no one else knows them," he said lightly.

"Then if you won't tell me what you were doing there, I won't tell you." Her chin set at a stubborn angle.

"So you have secrets too?" he queried. "Well, you are wise to keep them tucked away in your pretty little head. But I am curious about you. If you came here to see Keogh, why this elaborate disguise of a student seeking material for a thesis?"

SHE smiled at him but beneath her smile she sensed the glitter of a steel will. Somewhere, somehow, this girl had learned to keep her mouth shut.

"May I escort you to your hotel?" he asked.

"Certainly."

They chose to walk rather than to trust the skittish Martian taxicabs. Overhead the nearer moon was hurtling through the sky and the black vault of the heavens was bright with the light of a million glittering stars. The eternal night wind, blowing off the desert, soughed through the streets of the silent city. Harden pointed to the brightest star in the sky.

"What's it like, there?" he asked.

The star to which he was pointing was Earth. She was willing to talk about that—a green planet beyond the frozen miles of spaces, a world of green forests, of blue seas, of snow-capped mountain ranges, of great cities pointing glittering spires at the sky. Listening, Harden was aware of an intense desire to visit Earth. His grandparents had come from there. It was home, his home, the home of the human race, and, like the folk memory of a golden age, to him it was somehow a dream of heaven.

"When you talk about it, it sounds very beautiful," he said.

"Why don't you go see for yourself?" she asked.

"No. Not yet."

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"Why?"

"I'm going to, some day, but first I have a job to do here on Mars."

"Oh."

As they walked along, he was aware that she was almost flirting with him. At least, she was being very nice. Since the world began women have had ways to show men that they like them. Harden knew that this girl liked him. And he liked her. But—

"Good night," he said, at the door of her hotel.

Smiling, she thanked him for escorting her. He watched her as she went out of sight into the building, then turned away. There was a job waiting to be done here, a most difficult job. It involved rescuing the girl he had loved for years from what the Martians called the land of serenity.

Earthmen who had been long enough on Mars to know anything about the real conditions there had many names for what the Willies called the land of serenity. There was no touch of serenity about any of the names. Earthmen who knew called the land of serenity, the *world of lost hopes, never-never land,* or, more simply, *hell.*

The land of serenity was a vast walled-off area, shut off from the rest of the planet by a most cunningly contrived barrier. There was no capital punishment on Mars. There were no prisons on the planet. Murderers, thieves, robbers, those convicted of breaking any of the more serious Martian laws, were sentenced to the land of serenity. Kicked through the barrier, dumped beyond the walls, those sentenced to this place were permitted to live out their lives in any way they saw fit. In the land of serenity the murderer could kill, the robber rob, the arsonist burn, to his heart's content. It was a place where the only law was the strength of the strong.

Harden knew all about the land of serenity.

He had escaped from it.

Now he had returned to Mars to rescue the girl he loved from it.

HARDEN had not been sentenced to the land of serenity because of any crime he had committed. He had been born in the place. His parents had also been born there. His grandparents had made the mistake that sentenced them and their descendants forever—in accordance with strict Martian law—to the world of forgotten men. His grandparents—his grandfather as an atomic engineer and his grandmother as a dietician—had been members of the crew of the first space ship from Earth to Mars. Their mistake had been two-fold. One, in coming down they had made the error of damaging the ship beyond repair. Their second error had been in landing in the land of serenity.

Because they had landed there, they had had to stay. Their ship had been damaged beyond repair so they couldn't fly away. The fact that they were the first visitors from another planet did not matter a damn to the Martians. Immemorial custom dictated that no one should be permitted to leave the land of serenity. Once there, you stayed there, or else. Later arrivals from Earth had made strong protests to the Martian government, with no results. Earthmen might have discovered space travel but the Red Planet was ruled by the Martians; the strict laws of Mars did not permit anyone to leave the land of serenity. If the prisoner had gotten there by accident, that was his tough luck. He had to stay there. Eventually the unhappy explorers had been forgotten. Finding escape almost impossible, they had made the best of the situation.

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Harden had grown up in the land of serenity. With him always, his faithful shadow and constant companion, had been a yellow-headed, freckle-faced girl—Marcia Groner. At the age of seventeen Harden had been lucky enough to escape and because he did not want the Martians to have any clue to his identity, he had assumed the name of Harden. He had fled Mars, stowing away on the first outbound spaceship. He had been discovered and kicked off at the first port of call—Venus. He was safe there but always there had remained with him the memory of Marcia Groner, still living in the Martian equivalent of hell.

To rescue her, he had returned to Mars. He had gone to Keogh because underworld rumor had advised him that Keogh had discovered a way to escape from the land beyond the barrier, and, for a price, was aiding Martian criminals to escape. Keogh had been his big hope of rescuing Marcia. He had not known this was the same Keogh he had known on Ganymede.

"Damn Keogh!" he thought. "I'll rescue Marcia in spite of him."

In his heart he knew he had set himself an almost impossible task.

His task speedily became more nearly impossible. He did not hear the ping of the needle gun in the dark alley but he felt the sting of the needle in his arm. He knew instantly what had happened. His hand dived for his own gun.

When one of those needles struck you, it was ten seconds to oblivion. Harden drew his own gun, fired blindly up the alley. He tried to run. Waves of blackness swept over him. He staggered, fell, got up, fell again. This time he did not get up. Vaguely he saw the dark figures swarm out of the alley but he was completely unconscious before they dragged him off the street and back into the alley from which they had come.

CHAPTER III

The Land of Serenity

HARDEN'S first dazed impression was that of extreme cold. He was freezing to death. An icy wind was blowing over him, chilling him to the bone. He thought he was in bed and the covers had slipped off. He reached for them, intending to pull them up. The covers evaded his grasp. He reached for them again. No blankets, no wooly fur quilts, no nothing. He got a handful of sand for his pains. Not until then did he remember the dart from the needle gun that had struck him. He sat up.

Dawn, cold, windy, and bitter, was breaking on Mars. The sun was just peeping over the edge of the horizon, but its rays, shining across the sand, had no warmth in them.

"Where the hell am I?" Harden thought.

Then he saw the wall. It told him where he was. There was only one wall like this on the Red Planet. Something like the wall of ancient China, it stretched away and away into the distance, a wall of solid stone fifty feet high, its top broken at regular intervals by guard houses.

"Where the hell am I?" Harden thought. "Where else but in hell?"

He was in the land of serenity, the Devil's Island of Mars. He had spent too many years gazing at that wall, wondering what was on the other side of it, not to recognize it. It was the wall that circled the horrible forbidden world.

He had come to Mars to rescue a girl from this world. Instead he had been hurled back into it himself.

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"Why didn't they kill me?"

He did not doubt that Keogh was responsible for this. The reason why Keogh had not killed him was obvious: murder on Mars was punished by imprisonment here. But there was no penalty for capturing a man and dropping him over the wall. Martian custom held that every man should look out for his own neck. If he was so careless as to let an enemy capture him and drop him over the wall, that was his tough luck. Martian authorities, operating on the theory that it was better to punish ten innocent men than to let one guilty man escape, would do nothing about it.

Harden heard the footsteps of the guard on the wall making his regular morning rounds.

"Hey," he yelled. "Hey! A mistake has been made. I'm not supposed to be here."

The guard looked down. He was a Martian, with a stupid, sadistic face. "That's too bad," he said with mock sympathy in his voice. "But since you're there, I guess you'll just have to stay, unless you can sprout wings and fly over the wall."

"But listen," Harden protested. "I tell you there's been a mistake—"

"Sure. And you made it."

Laughing he continued his march along the wall. Harden sank down on the sand. He was still weak from the effects of the drug the needle had released into his bloodstream. Worse than anything else was the knowledge that he was again a prisoner behind the barrier. He had tasted freedom. Now that freedom was gone forever.

This was the lowest moment of his life. Nothing mattered now. Nothing.

HE WAS aroused by the sound of footsteps approaching across the sand. Three Willies were coming from a low collection of buildings about a quarter of a mile away. The shout of the guard on the wall had attracted their attention. Seeing them coming, Harden got grimly to his feet. He knew what was going to happen next. The guards on the wall had drawn together to witness it.

Harden felt in his pockets. The needle gun was gone. He had no weapon of any kind. The Martians broke into a run. Harden kept his hand in his pocket.

"Well!" he said.

The three Willies stopped. They eyed him thoughtfully. The hand in the pocket worried them. Clad in odds and ends of clothing, they looked like three grim scarecrows. Each one had a knife ready drawn in his hand.

"If you come a step closer, there will be three dead Willies," Harden observed. The hand in the pocket was bluffing them.

The Martians looked hungrily at him, undecided about what to do. Harden knew what they wanted. He had spent too many years in this land to be uncertain about that. They weren't going to get what they wanted, if he could help it.

"We saw you and came to see if we could help you," one of them said.

"I don't need any help."

"We mean no harm."

"No. We are quite friendly. We really came to welcome you." They spoke in the Martian language, all nasals and harsh sibilant sounds. Each one added his bit and each one smiled to show his good intentions. The smiles did not extend to their eyes, which remained cold and calculating.

"Beat it!" Harden said. "Before I start shooting." He made an aggressive motion with the hand he was holding in his pocket.

The Willies drew back. They did not

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understand this man. What they saw of him, they did not like. Usually persons inside the wall were easy prey. Newcomers here did not know the customs of the land and by the time they learned the customs, it was usually too late. The Martians fidgeted. On the wall the guards showed signs of disappointment.

"I'm going to count three," Harden said. "After that, I'm going to start shooting."

"One.

"Two."

He needed to go no farther. The Martians backed hastily away.

Harden sighed with relief. He had bluffed them. He had won this fight without having to fight.

"Keep moving," he said.

"Hey!" a guard on the wall yelled.

Harden and the three Martians looked up.

"He's bluffing you," the guard shouted to the three Martians. "He hasn't got a gun."

Harden swore silently. Damn that guard! Damn him anyhow!

"Are you sure?" one of the Willies called.

"Of course!" the guard said emphatically. "No one would be fool enough to leave a gun in the possession of a man he was going to drop over the wall, would he? He's bluffing you. Go get him."

Harden knew what would happen now and he knew what he had to do—fast. The only law in this place was the law of the strong and the knives of the Martians made them stronger than he was. Like lightning, he stripped off his jacket, his trousers, shoes and socks, shirt, everything he was wearing, down to his shorts. That was what the Willies wanted—his clothes. They would take anything of value he possessed but they really wanted his clothes.

"Here," he said, flinging the garments at them. "You want them so badly. Take them."

Clad only in his shorts, he turned and walked away. Would they follow him? He thought not. He had nothing of value left, except his skin, and even a Martian could not use that.

THEY didn't follow him. Dividing his clothes between them, they went back to the cluster of low buildings from which they emerged. Harden followed them. He had no other place to go. In the land of serenity, it did not matter where you went. One place was as bad as any other place.

The buildings formed a rude village. Here, if anywhere, Harden had to find food, clothing, shelter—and a weapon. Whatever happened from now on was strictly up to him. Whether he lived or died would depend on his wits—and his strength.

Most of the houses in the village were falling to pieces. Little attempt was ever made at repairs here. What was the point in repairing a house? Somebody would only take it away from you if it looked too good. Only one structure seemed neat and orderly. Harden went here first.

A giant of a man was lounging in the doorway. He had a great bushy beard and a heavy head of red hair that was shot through with streaks of gray. A broad belt circled his waist. Hanging from the belt on his right was a needle gun and on his left was a long knife. He looked competent, but most of all, he was human. He watched Harden approach.

"By gad! You're human!" were his words of greeting. "I saw the Willies take your clothes but I thought you were a Martian." He paused, looked Harden over closely. What he saw must have satisfied him. He opened

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the door and stood to one side.

"Come in," he said.

"Thank you," Harden answered.

"My name is Ambrose," the giant said. "Known hereabouts as Red Ambrose."

"My name is Harden."

"Sit down, Harden."

No questions were asked, no information was volunteered. Ambrose set food upon the table. Harden knew that this courtesy was strictly because he was a human and men from earth had a habit of sticking together. Because he was starving and cold, Ambrose would feed him. That much the red giant would do for any men. He would do nothing more. Everything else was up to Harden.

Harden ate slowly and carefully. Strength flowed back into his body. The food warmed him, took the chill out of his bones. He reached for a cigarette, realized then that he had no cigarettes. Red Ambrose saw the gesture, silently offered a smoke. The cigarette was made of Martian tobacco, strong and dry, but it was soothing to the nerves. They smoked in silence. When the cigarette was finished, Harden carefully snubbed it in the tray.

"Will you lend me a knife?" he said.

Red Ambrose looked him over then, carefully weighing and measuring him. In silence he rose, walked to a wall cabinet, unlocked it.

"Take your pick," he said.

THE cabinet was full of knives. Harden selected one, tested the edge on his thumb, felt the heft and the balance of it. It was a good knife, it balanced well, it felt right in the hand.

"Thank you," Harden said.

"Want a scabbard?"

"No, thanks. I won't need it."

"Okay. It's as you say."

Harden walked to the front door, opened it, and went out. Red Ambrose gathered up the dishes, took them to the kitchen, began to wash them. He hummed softly as he worked. Carefully drying each plate, each cup and saucer, he put them in their places. Then he returned to the living room, lit a cigarette, and sat down. There was a thoughtful look on his face and he seemed to be listening for some sound that was slow in coming. He finished one cigarette, lit another one.

There was a knock on the door.

Ambrose went to open it.

Harden stood there. He was fully clothed now. He was holding a knife, hilt foremost, toward Red Ambrose.

"I'm returning your knife," he said. "Thank you for lending it to me."

The blade of the knife was bright and clean but there was a stain on the hilt. Ambrose looked at it, looked at Harden. In the coat Harden was wearing there was a slit. It was just over the heart. There was a stain around it. Ambrose's eyes fixed on the slit.

"One of the Willies was wearing the coat," Harden explained.

"Ah—."

Red Ambrose began to grin. The grin spread all over his face.

"Come in, Harden," he said. "Come in and tell me about yourself."

There was respect and warm regard in his voice. Harden entered. He had won the first round in the battle for his life in the land of serenity. He had won his clothes back, and he had a weapon. He had three weapons in fact, the knives he had taken from the three Martians who had robbed him of his clothes. But more than anything else —because in this place it was priceless —he had won a friend.

"Sit down. Have a cigarette. And tell me about yourself," Red Ambrose said. "Maybe we can work together in this hell hole."

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"Thank you," Harden said. "As for working with you, nothing would suit me better. About myself—"

He told the story of his life, how he had been born in this place, how he had escaped, why he had returned, and what had happened to him. Red Ambrose listened in silence.

"Keogh, eh?" he said at last. "I happen to know the man myself." A grim note crept into his voice. "In fact, he is responsible for my being here."

"You too!"

"Yeah," Red Ambrose drawled. "And if you would like some help in cutting his throat, you've come to the right place."

"I would like nothing better," Harden said. "But," he wryly added, "cutting Keogh's throat will be difficult. He is out and we are in."

"Maybe not so difficult," Ambrose stated.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this. Not two weeks ago I saw Keogh. A lot of Willies were with him. He was right here, in the land of serenity, right here in this same hellhole we're in."

"What?" Harden had risen to his feet. "Then that means—"

"It means Keogh has a way of getting in and out of this place. It means if we can find how he does it, maybe we can get out too."

"Lord!" Harden said. The word was a prayer. "If we could! If! But first—first I must find a girl."

"Naturally," Red Ambrose said. "While you are looking for her, I will be looking for the way Keogh gets in and out of the land of serenity."

CHAPTER IV

The Ship

"IT IS agreed," Red Ambrose said. "You will spend a week looking for the girl. I will spend the same time seeing what I can discover about Keogh. In one week, we will meet here again."

"Right," Harden said. He walked out of the little village. The residents watched him go. They might have envied him the gun he carried at his hip—Ambrose had provided that—or the clothes he wore, but they kept discreetly out of his way and made no effort to molest him. They remembered what had happened to the three Martians who had taken this man's clothes.

"A good man to leave alone," the inhabitants had agreed among themselves. In the future Harden's possessions and Harden himself would be safe among them. There were other villages where he was not known, and there he would have to prove himself, but the gun and the knife swinging at his hips would go a long way toward providing him with a passport—in fact, they were the only acceptable passports in this vast forbidden world.

He had spent two days with Red Ambrose, resting, talking, planning. Red Ambrose had been an engineer on a space ship. Keogh had come to him, tried to bribe him to smuggle derjin* to earth. Ambrose had refused. He had been walking near the space port when—ping—a needle gun had got him. He had awakened in the land of serenity. "Because I knew too much," he had explained. "Keogh was afraid I might tell the authorities what I knew."

Ambrose had not been able to help him in finding Marcia Groner. He had been here only two years and had never heard of the girl. The land of serenity was a big place. Harden would have to find her. He had come here to rescue her, and if there was a chance of escaping, he wanted to take her with

* Derpin.—A drug of Mars. Importation to earth was forbidden.—Ed.

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him. His plan was to visit the place where he had been born, the wreck of the old space ship, converted by its crew into living quarters and fortress. Marcia would be there. He wondered if she would remember him. What would she say when she saw him? What would he say when she saw her? He was thinking about Marcia but the face that kept coming into his mind was the face of Marion Gray.

He shrugged. Miss Gray was a very beautiful girl but Marcia had been loyal. In Bruce Harden's world, loyalty came first. In the harsh worlds of space, it was the loyalty of your comrade that counted most. It was just as simple as that.

On the evening of the second day, he reached the wrecked ship. It lay in a little valley near an oasis and he sighted it from the top of a nearby hill. His heart leaped at the sight. This was home, home! This was the world he had known as a kid, as a youngster just reaching manhood. Marcia would be here, and the kids he had known. There hadn't been but three children and only eight grown-ups — pitiful relic of the proud crew that once had landed here —but he would get to see them again. His own father and mother had died in an attack of criminals trying to raid the ship.

His heart leaped, then the exultation died. He looked at the ship and looked again. He went running down to the wrecked vessel, hoping that what he thought was true was not.

A hundred yards away he knew the truth. The ship was a wreck in reality. The carefully tended gardens in the oasis were overgrown with weeds and sand from the desert was drifting across them. The doors of the ship hung crazily open, the ports were broken, and the hull was smudged. Fire had raced through the hull.

THE ship was deserted. Harden went through it to make sure. It had been looted and burned, probably in another attack of the criminals of this vicious land. The humans who once had found refuge here were—gone. In the sand outside the entrance there was a skeleton.

Harden turned away. The ship had been deserted for years. As he walked away, he did not look back.

As he approached the hills, a figure darted out of a cave and lunged toward him. It looked like a walking skeleton. He drew his gun, then made no attempt to use it.

It was a man who had come out of the cave. He saw the gun, drew back.

"Don't shoot," he whimpered. "Don't shoot—"

Harden stared at this wreck of a human being. "By gad! It's Mr. Dorsey."

Dorsey was the son of the pilot of the first expedition. Harden remembered him perfectly. Dorsey had been an old man when Harden had left.

"You know me?" Dorsey whispered. "Do you know me?"

"Sure, I know you. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you."

Dorsey approached hesitantly, stared at Harden from rheumy, lack-luster eyes.

"Are—are you Jimmy Turner?" he whispered. "Jimmy Turner, who went away so long ago?"

"I'm Jimmy Turner," Harden answered.

"You—you've come back?" Dorsey faltered. "Why—why would anyone return to this place?" His voice was cracked and broken. Each word was a wheeze.

Harden did not attempt to explain. "I'm looking for Marcia Groner," he said. "Where—where is she? What —what happened to her? What hap-

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pened back there?" He pointed toward the wrecked ship.

"The ship? Oh, yes, the ship. Something happened to it. Let me see. Now what was it that did happen? I know. I'm certain I know. If I can only *think* what it was. . . ."

HIS eyes wandered from the ship to Harden, then he looked at the hills. "I can't remember," he sighed. "Some Willies came. There were a lot of them. But what happened after that—I don't know—"

"Was—was Marcia killed?" Harden whispered the words.

"Marcia? Marcia? Who is she?"

"Marcia Groner. You remember Marcia. She had yellow hair and freckles."

"Oh. Yes! Yes, I remember her. She—" For a moment elation showed on the lined face. Dorsey had remembered something. How that pleased him! Then the elation was gone as fast as it had come. The face was blank and vaguely worried. "No, I don't remember. For a second, I had it, but it got away before I could say it. What was her name again?"

"Marcia Groner," Harden patiently repeated. "The girl with the yellow hair."

"Marcia—Marcia—" Like pebbles thrown into a bottomless pit, the words fell down the well of the old man's memory. But the pit was bottomless and no answering splash came back. "Did something happen to her?" Dorsey queried.

"That's what I'm asking you," Harden said. "Where is Marcia? Try to remember."

Dorsey tried. He was anxious to please. This young man had brought back vague echoes of happier days and he would like to help if he could. The trouble was, he couldn't.

"Maybe she is dead," he suggested blankly. "So many are."

The idea seemed to please him. "Yes. That's it. I remember a girl. And she's dead. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"No," Harden said. "No. That wasn't what I wanted to know."

The grimness on his face frightened Dorsey. "Don't hit me!" the old man was suddenly begging. "Don't hit me. I didn't do anything." He cringed.

Harden forced himself to smile. "I'm not going to hit you," he said.

"You look like you would," Dorsey accused. "I'm scared of you. I'm scared—" He was backing away. When he had reached a safe distance, he turned and scooted off like a frightened rabbit.

"Poor devil," Harden whispered. "Poor son-of-a-gun—"

For a moment he thought of following Dorsey and trying to do something for him. He had concentrated food tablets with him. Dorsey probably hadn't had a square meal in years. The old man would welcome the tablets. "Wait a minute," Harden called. "I've got something for you."

Dorsey either did not hear him or would not believe him. Harden knew if he tried to follow, he would only frighten the old man more. There was nothing that could be done anyhow. This place was home to Dorsey, the only home he had ever known. He would prefer to remain here. Leaving a tin of the tablets where the old man man would find them, Harden walked away.

In his mind was a ceaseless refrain. "Yes, I remember a girl. And she's dead. Is that what you wanted to know?"

It wasn't what Harden wanted to know. It was the last thing he wanted to learn.

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RED AMBROSE opened the door at his knock. "Back so soon, eh? I'm glad to see you, Harden. I've got great news. I've discovered the damnedest thing. I know how Keogh gets in and out of this place and what he is doing here. But that can wait. Come in. Come in. Come in. Hey!" He looked past the man at the door. "You're alone. I thought you were going after a girl. What—oh—"

He saw Harden's face. His voice changed. The gruff heartiness went out of it, was replaced with a noncomittal bluntness. "What did you find?"

"She's dead."

"Oh." Ambrose held the door open, silently stood to one side while Harden entered and sat down. "Sorry," the giant engineer said then. "Sorry, old man. You have my sympathy."

"Thank you."

Nothing more was said. Nor would either of them under any circumstances ever reopen the subject. What was done, what had happened. The last chapter was written and the book was closed.

"About Keogh?" Harden said.

"Keogh? Yes, about Keogh. Harden, I've discovered the damnedest thing that ever happened on this or any other planet." Excited overtones were creeping into Red Ambrose's rumbling bass voice. Whatever it was he had discovered, just thinking about it made him excited. "Do you know the Martian legends about how the land of serenity came into existence?" he demanded.

Harden nodded. "It was the old idea of sanctuary, a temple or sacred plot of ground where anyone was safe. In this case it was the temple of the Little Lost God. A crook, chased by the cops, a traveler, running from bandits, could find safety in this temple. As long as he remained within the temple grounds, he would not be harmed."

Such was the legend of the origin of the land of serenity. As the centuries passed, the area of safety had gradually grown in size. The place of sanctuary had expanded from the size of a temple courtyard to a section of land as big as a county. It was becoming too large. And—crooks were using it as a base from which to sally forth on raiding expeditions. Great gangs of bandits thronged in the place of sanctuary, raiding Martian cities and retreating at full speed to the temple area when the police got on their trail. The sanctuary of the Little Lost God was becoming a darned nuisance.

The Martians, in accordance with their devious ideas of right and wrong, took what was to them the obvious solution. They said, "The temple of the Lost God is a sanctuary. All right, we'll let it be a sanctuary. But we will build a great wall around the whole area and all who are once inside, will have to stay inside."

SO THE wall was built. And eventually, as the centuries passed, the land of serenity came into being. The temple of the Little Lost God had become a sanctuary with a vengeance.

"No one is sure now whether there ever really was a temple," Harden said. "Or, if it existed, where it was located."

"There was a temple all right," Red Ambrose answered. "There is nothing left now but ruins but it once existed. And I know where it was located."

"So what?" Harden questioned. "Whas has that got to do with Keogh?"

"It has this to do with Keogh," Ambrose answered. "The temple was built on the surface. But it was either built over a vast series of underground caves or during the centuries the caverns were dug by the Martians. At any rate, the

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caves are there. They extend for miles. They either extend naturally or have been dug out *under the wall.* I've discovered that it is through these caves that Keogh is getting in and out of the land of serenity!"

"Well, I'm damned!" Harden gasped in amazement.

"You haven't heard all of it," Ambrose grimly continued. "Remember that the temple of the Little Lost God was a sanctuary. Anyone might find refuge there and be safe from all his enemies. Naturally a person whose life was saved would be grateful. He would make a gift to the temple. For centuries past the counting, these gifts were made: gold, jewels, the art treasures of the whole planet. The priests took the gifts and hid them away in the caverns under the temple. Keogh is hunting this hidden treasure. That is why he is coming into the land of serenity—to find and loot the lost treasure hidden under the temple of the Little Lost God."

Harden stared in amazement at Red Ambrose. The man had done a marvelous piece of detective work. Keogh had sniffed out and was on the trail of a gigantic hoard of hidden treasure!

"No wonder he was so darned excited when I turned up in his hideout!" Harden gasped. "No wonder he started shooting before he asked any questions. He thought I was trying to cut myself in on his find!"

"Exactly!" Red Ambrose said grimly. "With so much at stake, the wonder is that you ever got away alive. And now, my friend, we've got a chance at two things—to get out of this darned place, and to make ourselves a modest fortune at the same time, if—"

"If what?"

"If we're lucky," Red Ambrose grimly finished. His expression amplified his meaning.

CHAPTER V

In the Caverns

"FAIR warning," Red Ambrose said. "Nobody know how far these caves run. If we get lost in here, we'll be likely to stay lost forever."

"Getting cold feet?" Harden queried.

"Nope," the engineer cheerfully replied. "If you ask me, we had just as well be dead here as dead up there." He nodded toward the surface.

Harden nodded grim assent. They were in the caves under the temple of the Little Lost God. Except for the beams from their torches, they were in total darkness. The fluorescent lighting system used in the Martian cities had been invented long after this temple and the caves under it had been forgotten. There was a real chance of getting lost in the gloomy caverns. Legend said that the temple had been built because a god had been lost here.

Their plan was to find Keogh, or the Willies working for him, and follow them out of the caverns, keeping out of sight in the meantime. Keogh and his men knew a path through the place. Once Harden and Ambrose knew the way out, then they would decide how best to investigate the treasure Keogh was hunting here. The treasure was important; escaping was more important.

Dust inches thick was on the ground. With each step they took, it puffed up in little clouds. Red Ambrose was in the lead. He was following a double-line of footprints in the dust. They were his own footprints, made when he had been running down the rumor about Keogh.

"Another hundred yards and we will come to a round chamber, with caves leading out from it in all directions.

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That was as far as I went before. There were a lot of tracks leading into and out of this chamber. While I was there, Keogh and a bunch of Willies came through. I ducked out of sight and watched them. I figure if we follow the tracks they left behind them, they will lead us out of this place."

The chamber was just as Ambrose had described it. In some forgotten century it had been hollowed out of the solid stone. Radiating from it were six tunnels, also obviously artificial in origin. The dust here was thick with footprints. A path had been beaten from one tunnel, through the chamber, and out another tunnel on the opposite side.

"We'll follow the path," Ambrose said. "It will lead us somewhere."

"Yeah, but—*Lights out!*"

Coming down one of the side tunnels, Harden had caught a glimpse of a gleam of light. Turning out their torches, he and Ambrose ducked out of sight.

A GROUP of Martians filed into the chamber. There were at least fifteen of them, all armed. Apparently this was a rest point, for they all sat down and lit up cigarettes. They were so close that Harden could hear their voices. Suddenly one of them sat up.

"Humans!" he said.

He spoke in Martian but both Harden and Ambrose understood the language.

"There are humans near us," the Martian repeated.

The Martians possessed a strange sixth sense which enabled them to sense the presence of humans near them. Harden had seen them use their weird ability too often for him to doubt that they possessed it. "We better get moving!" he hissed.

"Wait," Red Ambrose cautioned. "They're not certain yet. Even if they do sense us, they won't do much looking for us. They're superstitious about this place. They won't do much running around in here. They're too scared of ghosts."

There was sound sense in what the engineer said. The two men crouched in the darkness, watching.

"I sense humans," the Willie repeated.

His comrades laughed at him. "Now what would humans be doing in here?" one of them demanded.

"They are here," the Willie stubbornly repeated. He got to his feet and went sniffing round the chamber like a dog that suspects the presence of a dangerous animal but is not quite sure. His comrades watched him.

"See! Here are footprints. I told you there were humans here. These footprints prove it."

He was pointing at the footprints Harden and Ambrose had left on the dusty floor.

"Now it is time to be moving!" Red Ambrose gritted. "And damn it, no matter where we go, they'll be able to follow us. This dust is as bad as snow. We'll leave footprints in it every time we move. But maybe they won't follow us far. Come on."

Fifteen minutes later they knew they had underestimated the Martians. The Willies had not caught up with them—fear of an ambush made them go slowly — but they were hanging doggedly to the trail. Harden and Ambrose could not go very fast either. They could not show a light and in consequence they had to feel their way along. If they were not careful the tunnel might drop off into nothingness under their feet.

The tunnel did not drop off into nothingness. Instead it came to an abrupt end. Harden cursed softly as

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his groping fingers met the obstruction.

"End of the trail?" Ambrose queried softly.

"I don't know," Hardtn answered. Behind, in the distance, he could hear the Martians. They were not in sight as yet. He dared to turn on his light.

"Turn that damned thing off," Ambrose hissed. "If those Willies get a glimpse of that light, our goose is cooked."

"This is not a dead end. It's a door!" Harden answered.

"A door? Are you sure?"

Harden was already at work. The light had revealed that the obstruction blocking their way was a door. Made of wood, it had been constructed long before the Martians invented the system of door they used in their cities, doors that opened at a wish or at a spoken command. This one had a heavy iron handle. Harden grasped it, turned.

"Get a move on," Ambrose urged him. "I can see the lights of the Willies."

"I'm doing the best—ah—" With a squeak of unoiled hinges the door swung open. Harden and Ambrose leaped through. Harden started to close the door before he realized they had stepped into a lighted chamber.

TEMPORARY fluorescent lights had been rigged on the walls. They revealed a large room that had apparently served as a shrine at some time in the past. There was an altar with the state of a god in a niche behind it.

It was not the altar nor the statue that gripped Harden's attention. It was the person in the room.

Marion Gray! The girl he had met in Keogh's hangout, whom he had last seen as she walked through the lobby of her hotel, the girl who had come to Mars to do research on Martian customs for a Ph.D. was here! She was here, in the caverns under the temple of the Little Lost God, in the land of serenity!

The squeak of the door had attracted her attention. She turned toward them. Simultaneously Red Ambrose went for the needle gun holstered at his hip.

Ambrose did not know this girl. He had never seen her before. So far as he knew, any person he met in these caverns was an enemy. In the land of serenity you didn't stop to think: you shot first. Otherwise you did not shoot at all.

"Drop that gun!"

It was not Red Ambrose who had spoken. He hadn't had time to open his mouth. It was the girl who had given the command. At the same time she swung up the weapon she was carrying.

It was not a needle gun she held in her hands. It was a snub-nosed submachine gun, for close quarters' work, one of the deadliest weapons ever invented by the human race. Ambrose took one look at the weapon. He hesitated, undecided whether to risk a shot from his own needle gun or to drop it. The needle gun was slow in its effect. Ambrose could shoot, if he chose, but even if his needle reached its target, there would be ten seconds before it took effect. In ten seconds the girl's gun could literally cut him in two with an almost solid stream of slugs.

Ambrose hesitated only an instant, long enough to compute the chances. Then he dropped his gun.

Harden had not attempted to draw. He did not want to shoot this girl. She was his friend. He had helped her out of trouble. There was a mistake somewhere. He turned to close the door.

A slug whistled through the air

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within six inches of his head. The explosion of the gun was deafening in this restricted area.

"Hey!" he yelled.

"Loosen your gun belt and drop it to the floor," the girl ordered.

"But there is a bunch of Willies coming down this tunnel," he protested.

She seemed not to have heard him. He had turned again and was facing her. She looked straight through him. There was no hint of recognition on her face. The muzzle of the wicked little weapon she carried was centered on his heart.

"Drop your belt!" she commanded.

Her finger was on the trigger of the gun.

"Do what she says," Red Ambrose whispered. "She means to shoot."

Harden slowly loosened the belt, let it drop to the floor.

Yelping, the Willies who had been following them surged out of the tunnel. Harden did not know what to expect. He waited for the ping of the needle guns; the bite of the needles digging into his flesh. The girl would go down too. She had not believed him when he said they were being followed. More, she had not recognized him. She would pay for her lack of recognition with her life. The Willies would shoot her with no more compunction than they would display in shooting him and Ambrose.

The Willies did not shoot her. They came charging into the chamber, saw the two men, saw the girl.

"Tie them up," she ordered, in perfect Martian.

FOR a second, the Martians hesitated. Then they obeyed her order. Bruce Harden and Red Ambrose found themselves tied hand and foot and lying on the floor.

"Who are you men?" the girl demanded.

"Who are we?" Harden choked. "Who the hell do you think we are?"

"I asked you a question. Answer it."

"We're a couple of boy scouts on vacation," Harden bitterly answered. "I suppose you're one of the campfire girls and that pretty soon we'll all be roasting marshmallows around a jolly campfire."

Smack!

Her hand left white marks across the scar on his face as she slapped him. The slap made him furiously angry. "Why don't you kick me?" he raged. "You've got me tied up so it would be perfectly safe."

"A good idea," another voice said. "I'll just do that, since you suggest it."

Harden felt the pound of a boot against his ribs. It almost knocked the breath out of him. He turned over—and looked straight into the grinning face of Keogh.

It was Keogh who had spoken. He had come from an adjoining room and had entered silently. He looked down at the two men.

"Well, well," he said. "It's Harden. Like a bad penny you always turn up where you're not wanted. I knew I was taking a chance when I had you dropped over the wall instead of slitting your throat, which is what I should have had done."

"Why in the hell didn't you? Failing to have my throat slit was an oversight of your part—"

"An oversight that can be easily remedied," Keogh said grimly. "And who is this?" he asked, nudging Harden's companion. "Well, if it isn't Red Ambrose! My old friend Ambrose, the engineer who would rather be honest than be rich. What are you doing here in this dismal place?"

"I just came along for the ride," Ambrose gritted. "Damn you, Keogh, you've got us. Whatever it is you're going to do with us, get it over with."

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"You may be certain I will think of something to do with both of you," Keogh said. "But first, I want to ask you some questions. How did you get here?"

How they had gotten into the caverns under the temple of the Little Lost God was bothering Keogh. What they had done, others might do. He did not want any uninvited visitors until he had finished his business in this place. Harden sensed his uneasiness.

"You'll find out soon enough what we were doing here," Harden said.

"I'll find out right now!" Keogh answered. He nodded to one of the Martians. This was important. If the prisoners in the land of serenity learned the caves under the ruined temple offered a way to escape, Keogh could anticipate an immediate invasion of hard-bitten criminals. Keogh meant to use torture to get the information he wanted.

"I give up," Red Ambrose said. Quietly he answered Keogh's questions.

HARDEN said nothing. If Ambrose wanted to talk to avoid torture, it was all right. There was nothing to be gained by defying Keogh, except slow death. Harden watched the girl.

She had drawn back. There was a strained sick look on her face but she made no effort to interfere. Only when the questioning had reached an end did she speak.

"What—what are we going to do with them?" she asked.

"They don't know anything," Keogh answered. "Ambrose claims not to have told anybody about this place. Do with them? There's only one thing to do with them!" He drew a thumb across his throat.

"You mean, kill them?"

"Of course. I left Harden alive once. I'm not going to make that mistake twice."

"But—" she started, in protest.

The grin left Keogh's face. His eyes drilled into the girl. "But what?" he questioned. "If you've got any silly ideas about leaving them alive—"

"I was thinking about the danger," she stated.

"What danger?"

"Well, if we kill them, and the Martian authorities ever discover it—"

"How will they discover it?"

Instead of answering, she glanced at the Martians surrounding them. Keogh got the idea. After all, one of his helpers might squeal. In that case, he might find himself suddenly entering the land of serenity. He hesitated.

"I've got a better idea," the girl suggested. "One that will not leave us in any danger."

"What is it?"

"I've studied the legends of this place. Here's what I suggest." She drew Keogh to one side, spoke in a low tone of voice. Harden could not hear what she had said but from the delighted grin on Keogh's face he knew that, whatever she was suggesting, it was bad news for them.

"Pick 'em up," Keogh shouted at the Willies, indicating the two men. "I've got a perfect place to put them."

CHAPTER VI

The Maze of the Temple

HARDEN looked at the candle. It would burn maybe five or six hours. No longer. He looked up. Overhead, in the ceiling of the chamber, was a round hole. He and Ambrose had been lowered down that hole on ropes. The hole was at least sixty feet deep and they were at the bottom of it.

"I wish," Red Ambrose said, "Keogh had cut our throats."

"We're alive," Harden said.

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"Yeah? And where are we?"

"I know."

"—We're in the maze of the temple of the Little Lost God. We're in a place where a god got lost and died because he couldn't find his way out again. This is where the priests of the temple dumped their enemies. Right down here at the bottom of this hole is where they dumped them. And if one of them ever got out of this place—"

A note of hysteria had crept into the engineer's voice. He shook his fist at the hole.

"Damn that girl! Damn her, I say. Why didn't she let Keogh cut our throats? Why did she suggest to him that he have us dumped down here, where we will die of thirst and hunger? Why would she do such a thing?"

Harden said nothing. The girl had suggested to Keogh that the two men be dumped here. In forgotten centuries the priests of the temple up above had dropped their enemies here. Legend had a name for this place—The Maze of the Thousand False Hopes. It was a twisting, tortuous series of interconnecting tunnels, with one true exit, and a thousand doors that looked like exits, but weren't. It was as clever and as diabolical a method of torture as was ever designed by the devious Martian mind. There *was* a way out of the place. That was the catch about the whole business, that was the real torture. The poor wretch, dropped into the maze, knew that there was one way out—if he could only find it. The hope of escaping would force the victim to search until he dropped in his tracks. There were a thousand false exits and only one real way to get out.

"I know the odds are bad," Harden admitted.

"Bad? They're impossible. A thousand to one! What kind of a chance is that?"

The giant engineer seemed to be lost in despair. He had sat down, and holding his head in his hands was looking despondently at the floor.

"We're not dead until we give up," Harden reminded him.

"Poppycock."

"But there is a way out of here."

"That's what we're supposed to think," Ambrose said bitterly. "We're supposed to wear ourselves out hunting for the way to escape. That's what the Willies want us to do. I'm not going to do it. I'm going to sit right here."

"And wait?"

"And wait for the end," the engineer said sullenly. "To hell with trying. I'm whipped and I know it."

Smack! Harden's fist pounded against the jaw of the engineer. He didn't hit hard. He didn't intend to hit hard.

"Why, damn you!" Red Ambrose roared, leaping to his feet.

Harden ducked away. "Easy, Red," he grinned. "You were down in the dumps and I had to do something to rouse your fighting spirit. Keep away from me, you big gorilla. I socked you for your own good."

For an instant the engineer glared at him. Then the glare went out of his eyes and his fists, raised ready to strike, unclenched. "Okay, Harden. You win. We'll try to get out. But I'll bet you forty dollars that we end up right back here."

"I'll take the bet," Harden said. He picked up the candle. Keogh, in keeping with the tradition of the maze, had provided the candle. It was in reality only an added refinement of torture. It would soon burn out and when it did—

Four tunnels branched out from the chamber. Harden regarded them thoughtfully. "Enny, meeny, miny, mo, catch a Willie by his toe—" He shrugged, turned toward the nearest

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opening. "One is as bad as another," he said.

As he entered the tunnel he stumbled over something lying almost buried in the dust. Looking down he saw what he had tripped over. A skeleton.

"He didn't make it out of here either," Red Ambrose said grimly.

THE maze was endless. Part of the caves were natural and had apparently been formed by an underground river that had flowed here during the long gone centuries when there were still rivers on the Red Planet. Water had dug this endless system of caverns but water flowed here no longer. The place was as dry as the desert and ankle deep in dust. They poked through gloomy holes that were just big enough to crawl through; they entered caverns where the roof was hundreds of feet over their heads. Here and there additional passages had been cut, connecting various branches of the caves. The Martians had improved on what nature had provided, and their improvements had been made with the idea in mind of adding confusion to the efforts of the poor wretch who was trying to get out of this place.

Which was the right turning?

When there were so many choices, there was no way of knowing which way to turn. Somewhere there was a right way. All other ways were wrong.

"We'll never make it," Ambrose grumbled. "We're damned fools for trying."

Harden kept silent. Logically the engineer was right. There was no real hope of escape. Harden kept going because the will to fight had been bred into his bones. He was the grandson of one of the space pioneers, the hardy breed that dared to venture into the deserts of space. *They* hadn't quit. They hadn't given up. Nor would he quit while there was strength in his body to try. He stumbled again and looking down, saw another skeleton.

"Another one that didn't make it," the engineer said.

"I know," Harden answered. "There will probably be others—"

There were others. They found one tunnel where the floor was covered with bones. Harden looked at them, turned back. "This is not the way," he said.

Which was the way?

The candle in his hand burned lower and lower. Regarding it, he silently cursed Keogh for giving it to him. Without the candle, they would have had to fumble through the darkness. That would have been bad. But when the candle was gone—

It was going.

He thought of Marion Gray, somewhere overhead in another series of caverns. What was she thinking, knowing that she had sent two men to this place? What was in her mind?

"She was with Keogh all the time," he muttered. "She was working for him. When I ran into her in his hideout, she sized up the situation and played me for a sucker, trying to find out what I wanted with Keogh. I wonder—"

The sudden thought struck him: When he had left her at her hotel, had she promptly phoned Keogh, telling him where Harden could probably be found? Had Keogh, acting on her information, planted thugs to wait for him? Was that the explanation of the shot from the alley?

Keogh hadn't been just lucky then. He had known where Harden would likely be.

"I could wring her neck!" Harden said.

"Whose neck?" Ambrose queried.

"The girl who suggested we be put here."

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"You'll have to take your turn on that," Ambrose said.

They tramped on.

THE tunnels twisted and turned. Where the ancient river had dug deep, the tunnels dipped. At other places they went up. Once they came to a place where a straight drop lay before them. Harden tossed a pebble into the darkness. No sound of it striking bottom ever came back.

"That hole goes down to the bottom of the planet," he said.

They turned back, retracing their steps, chose another tunnel at random.

The candle was burning shorter and shorter. Hot grease was running over Harden's hand. "An hour more," he estimated mentally.

One more hour and they would be without light. Before they had been dropped here, they had been carefully searched. Weapons, matches, flashes, had been taken from them.

The hour passed. All that remained of the candle was a tiny bit of the wick. It gave off a small smoky flame.

"When it's gone, we'll feel our way," Harden said grimly. "There is a way out of this place and we'll find it, even if we have to feel for it."

Ahead of them the tunnel opened out into a round chamber.

"Maybe we've finally found the way out!" Harden said.

He stepped into the chamber, stopped. A sudden electric thrill shot through him.

"Footprints in the dust!" he whispered. "We've reached a part of the cave where the Martians have been. They know their way out. All we will have to do is follow them."

Red Ambrose eagerly ran forward and examined the footprints. When he looked up all hope had gone from his face.

"Martian footprints, hell!" he blurted out. "These are our own footprints. This is the chamber where we started. We've gone in a circle and are right back where we started from!"

The maze had brought them back to the same chamber where they had been dropped.

The flame of the candle burned Harden's hand and he did not feel it. Back where they had started from! There was the tunnel they had taken, the skeleton he had tripped over. There was no mistaking the chamber. It was the same place from which they had started.

Not quite the same. Something was different. For a second Harden could not determine that difference. Something was charged. He could not tell what.

Then he saw what it was.

A scarf, a piece of silk, was lying on the dusty floor.

He picked it up.

The four ends had been tied together to form a tiny parachute. Attached to the parachute was an instrument that looked like a compass.

"What the heck is this?" Harden whispered.

He turned the little instrument over in his hands. It wasn't a compass, yet it looked something like one. It was made of gold. Inside the top, behind a bit of glass, a tiny needle danced. He turned it in his hands. No matter how he turned it, the needle came back to point in the same direction.

"Let me see that thing," Red Ambrose demanded. "By the Lord Harry, it's—"

For the first time since they had been dropped in the maze, there was hope in the voice of the engineer. A man dying of thirst in the desert, coming suddenly and unexpectedly upon a spring of cool sparkling water, might cry out as Red

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Ambrose cried out, and for the same reason.

"What do you mean?" Harden asked.

In a trembling voice, the engineer explained what he meant.

CHAPTER VII

In the Temple of the Lost God

KEOGH entered the chamber where the statue of the Little Lost God stood in its niche.

"Lights," he said.

The fluorescents began to glow, then leaped to full illumination. Keogh had had this lighting system installed here. He needed light to sort the loot the gangs of Willies brought to his place.

Loot was piled here now. For centuries, grateful Martians had brought gifts to this temple. These gifts the priests had hidden in the vaults below. Now Keogh and his gang were rooting them out of their hiding places.

Vases of delicate china, worth a fortune in the smart antique shops on Earth, tapestries, their colors faded, the cloth dried and rotted, golden ornaments, bracelets, jeweled combs made for the use of some Martian lady of the long ago, jugs of silver, golden plates, tiny figurines of the Little Lost God, made of gold and encrusted with jewels —the loot of centuries was here.

The Spaniards, looting the treasure vaults of the Incas, never made a richer haul than this. There was wealth here to tempt any pirate. And Keogh, though he did not sail under the skull and crossbones, was a pirate. When he saw the pile of loot that had been collected in his absence, he grinned from ear to ear.

"We're going to clean up," he said to the person who was following him.

Marion Gray did not answer. She glanced speculatively at the pile of treasure, then looked uneasily around the room.

"You don't seem very pleased," Keogh muttered.

This brought a swift smile to her face. "But I *am* pleased," she insisted. "I was just thinking—"

"—about those two fools we dropped into the maze?" Keogh questioned shrewdly.

"Well, yes."

"Forget about them. They're done for by now. It's been two days since we dropped them down that hole and if they haven't already blundered into some pit and gotten themselves killed, they've gone raving mad. To hell with them. They got exactly what they deserved when they tried to butt into my business."

The girl said nothing. Keogh looked keenly at her, then busied himself with something that interested him even more than she did—the sorting of the loot.

The tapestries he tossed contemptuously aside. "We can't ship this junk," he said.

"There are museums back on earth that would pay a very good price for them," the girl suggested.

"So what? The damned things fall to pieces if you touch 'em. We can't fool around with junk for some damned museum. What we want is the gold and the jewels."

He began sorting. The girl watched him for a few minutes, then laid aside the sub-machine gun she was carrying and began to help.

Keogh's round fat face beamed with jovial good humor as he put the golden ornaments in small packing cases. Wealth to ransom half a planet was here. Wealth was what he wanted. Wealth was what he had come to Mars to seek. He had what he wanted.

"When we return to Earth, we'll go places and do things, me and you," he promised.

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"Yes," the girl answered. "But before we leave Mars, I must complete gathering the material for my thesis."

"Are you still thinkin' about that thing?" Keogh demanded. "Forget it. What the hell good is a thesis for some stuffy college when you can help me spend this?" He gestured toward the treasure.

"But that was the reason I came here. That was why I entered the land of serenity — to gather material on Martian customs. My school is expecting me to complete the thesis. It will have a great deal of value, to students of Mars."

Keogh laughed. "What the hell a cute little babe like you wants to monkey around with that educational stuff is beyond me. This college business is all the bunk anyhow. Me, I never went past the seventh grade and I can't see where it's hurt me. I've done a lot better than all right."

A FILE of Martians entered the room. Keogh greeted them joyously. They were bringing more treasure to be sorted.

"This load finishes everything found in the last hiding place," their leader told Keogh.

"That's fine," Keogh answered. "As soon as we get this back to my headquarters, we'll divide and pay off. After that, I'm shaking the dust of this place off my feet. I know when I've got enough. I'm clearing out."

The Willies squatted on the floor, resting, talking among themselves about what they would do with the money they would receive from this treasure. Suddenly one of them stood up.

"Humans!" he said.

Instantly every Martian eye was focused on him.

"What are you talking about?" Keogh demanded.

"I sense humans," the Martian said. "There are humans near us."

"Of course there are humans near you," Keogh answered. "Miss Gray and I both are human."

"I am not referring to you. There are other humans near by."

"Nonsense!" Keogh laughed.

But the Martian was not satisfied. He went snooping around the chamber, poking in corners, looking, feeling for something he thought he sensed. Only one place he avoided—the statue of the Little Lost God. Like all Martians, he was intensely superstitious. Evil might lurk in the statue. The Little Lost God might return here and blast these blasphemers of his sacred places. The other Martians watched the one who thought he sensed something.

A feeling of uneasiness seemed to run through them. One by one they stopped their talking, their hushed voices dropping away into silence. Their eyes followed their comrade who searched through the temple chamber. Marion Gray glanced up at them, then went on about her work. Keogh paid no attention. At their best, he regarded the Martians as dopey fools. At their superstitious worst, he thought they were little better than savages.

Then—it happened.

From everywhere and from nowhere, from the floor, from the ceiling, from the four walls of the temple chamber, especially from the niche where the statue of the Little Lost God stood, there came a burst of wild, mad laughter. If all the demons in hell laughed at the same time, they would make a sound like this. It roared through the temple.

The Martians leaped wildly to their feet.

"The Little Lost God!" one whispered.

"—is laughing," a second added.

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THE sound struck fear to their hearts. They had dared to enter a place sacred to a god, to disturb the treasures that belonged to a god, and the god was laughing at them.

The laughter died. A voice came. It was a raging voice, hot with anger; and it spoke in tones of thunder. It spoke the language of Mars as only a native of the Red Planet could speak it.

"Woe unto you!" the voice said. *"You have trespassed within my sacred places; you have looted my temple of its treasure. Now the hour of my vengeance is come. Woe unto you!"*

The voice was a roaring torrent of sound.

"I will strike you with my thunder. I will blast you with my lightning," the voice roared. *"Wherever you go, I will follow you. My vengeance will overtake you, no matter how far or how fast you run."*

Terror gouged grooves in the superstitious minds of the Martians. They knew in their hearts that they had done wrong in entering this place. They had been afraid here, and it had taken the combination of Keogh's forceful persuasion and the lure of loot to get them into this vast system of caverns.

"It is the Little Lost God!" one whispered.

"He will destroy us."

"Run!"

"Halt!" This was Keogh speaking now. Keogh might be many things but he was not superstitious. He sensed a trick. "You damned fools!" he raged at the Martians. "Don't pay any attention to that voice. Somebody is fooling you. Here, I'll show you it's a trick, that somebody is hiding behind that statue."

He ran across the temple, leaped up to the alcove where the statue rested. Keogh was convinced somebody was hiding behind that statue. He did not know who it might be, but the purpose of the voice was obvious: to scare hell out of his Martians.

The Martians saw him disappear behind the statue. A second later they saw him appear on the other side. There was a blank, bewildered look on his face. He had expected to find someone hiding here. He had gone all around the statue and had found no one. Except for the statue, the alcove was completely barren, without furnishings of any kind. Other than behind the statue there was absolutely no place for anyone to hide.

There wasn't anyone behind the statue. This fact bewildered Keogh. His bewilderment showed on his face.

"Hah hah hah hah," the laughter rang through the temple. *"Hah!"* it abruptly ended.

Keogh was standing behind the statue. He was looking up at it, trying to understand what the hell was happening. The Martians below were watching him. They didn't know whether to run or to stay.

Keogh couldn't see what happened until after it happened. The Willies could see it. The sight drove hot irons of terror through their minds.

A great hand reached out from behind Keogh and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Hah. Got you!" the statue roared.

The Martians saw the hand grab Keogh. That was all they needed to see. Keogh had defied the god and the god had grabbed him. They were scared to death already. A split second after the hand grabbed Keogh there wasn't a Martian left in the temple. If devils had been following them, they could not have run faster.

An ordinary attacker, they would have fought to the death, if necessary. But a god who laughed at them, and grabbed their leader—this, they could

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not fight. They ran like drunken fools pursued by demons.

KEOGH must have suffered an awful shock when he felt that hand grab his shoulder. The soul-wrenching agony of that moment must have been terrific. Keogh was neither a coward nor a fool. But he had been behind that statue and he knew no one was there. Then a hand that could only have come from nowhere grabbed him. Even his shock-proof brain was not proof against this. He screamed, jerked free, leaped down from the raised alcove where the statue stood.

Panic struck him. Completely forgotten were the two needle guns in his pockets. In that mad moment, with wild, panicky fear raging through his brain, Keogh could think of only one thing—to run.

He ran. The Martians had gone in one direction. Keogh did not follow them. He dived into the nearest tunnel.

Even as he started to run, he knew he was being followed. Before he was in the tunnel, he heard the footsteps start. Hot and furiously they were coming after him. For a short distance, the lights from the temple illumined the tunnel. Before he was out of the glow cast by the lights, Keogh recovered enough from his panic to look back.

In the depth of his mind was the fear that he was somehow being followed by an angry god. What he saw frightened him even more than a god would have done.

Red Ambrose, great bushy beard thrust forward, was right behind him. Running beside Red Ambrose, head thrust forward, straining every muscle to overtake him, was Bruce Harden.

Two ghosts out of hell!

Unlike ghosts, they had knives, sharp pointed, keen edged, long bladed knives, the terrible fighting knives of Mars, razor edged and deadly. Keogh saw the knives. He knew what the blades would do to him. He saw the fierce, resolute anger on the faces of the men who followed him. He knew he had wronged these men. From the look on their faces, he knew what they would do to him if they caught him.

He screamed, tried to run faster. The floor seemed to open up under him. He plunged down, down, down. His scream ended in a sudden thud. Then there was silence.

BRUCE HARDEN and Red Ambrose stood beside the round hole in the tunnel. They had barely managed to stop in time to keep from following Keogh. His scream had come back to them, and the thud that ended it.

"Well," Red Ambrose panted, "the dirty dog! He finally got exactly what was coming to him. He fell into the same hole that he had us lowered down, the hole that leads to the maze. And did he squash when he hit bottom!"

Like Lot's wife, Keogh had looked behind him and had run headlong into the hole that led to the maze of the temple of the Little Lost God. To the bottom of that hole was a long drop. Keogh had splashed to his death at the bottom of the hole.

"Well, that's that," Red Ambrose panted. "For a minute, when he came charging up into the alcove, I thought he had us spotted. After all, he might have known about the hidden door behind the statue, and the trick voice amplification system the old priests used to scare hell out of their followers. He might have known about that."

"He might," Harden admitted. "But he didn't. But darn you! Why did you open that door and grab him? If you had missed, we'd have been left

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in a hell of a spot."

"I just couldn't help it," the engineer admitted. "When I looked through the peephole and saw how close he was and when I remembered all the suffering he had caused me, I wanted to cut his throat then and there. Which reminds me. There is another matter that needs our attention."

"I know," Harden said. "I'm going to attend to it right now."

SHE was still waiting in the temple. Backed against the wall, submachine gun held ready, she was waiting for them. She had seen everything that had happened. Some of it she had understood. There was much she hadn't. The gun covered them as they entered.

Harden ignored the weapon. He walked straight up to her, took something from his pocket.

"Is this yours?" he asked.

It was a bit of gayly-colored silk, a scarf, such as a woman might wear to hold her hair in place. She looked at it.

"I'm so glad you found it," she said. "I'm so glad. I'm so glad. I was afraid."

The four ends of the scarf had been tied together to form a small parachute.

"I told you it was her scarf!" Harden shouted to his companion. "I told you she was the one who had dropped the tell-tale down to us, so we could find our way out of that damned maze. Now, pig-head, admit you were wrong."

It was obvious there had been argument between them on this point. "Well, maybe she did drop that gadget down to us," the engineer admitted. "Maybe she did drop down the tell-tale the old priests used to find their way through the maze. But if that is so, why in the heck did she suggest we be put there in the first place?"

"To save our necks," Harden said. "Keogh was going to have our throats cut. If she hadn't suggested we be put in the maze, he would certainly have had us killed. Isn't that right?" Harden demanded, turning to the girl.

She was smiling now. The tension was leaving her face. "That's right," she said. "I recognized you the minute you came bursting into this chamber. But—Keogh was in the next room. There were several Martians with him. If I tried to help you, he would overhear me. The only thing I could do was turn my gun on you."

"See!" Harden said to the engineer. "See!"

"Um," Red Ambrose rumbled in his beard. "I made a mistake. Well, I am glad to admit it. Lady, I had you figured wrong. I hope you will forgive me."

She did not know the name of this red-bearded giant, but that did not matter. She was more than willing to forgive him.

"Now," Red Ambrose said, looking at the piles of treasure, "what next? I don't mind admitting that I could use some of this stuff, if we can carry it out."

"We'll take what we can carry in our pockets," Harden said bluntly. "And get out. As for me, I'll be only too glad to get out alive."

"Take what you want," the girl said. "It belongs to anybody."

CHAPTER VIII

The End of Searching

HARDEN and Red Ambrose sat on the terrace of the best hotel in Mars City. Shaved, their hair cut, wearing new clothes, they looked like prosperous citizens from Earth visiting the Red Planet on vacation. They had eaten and slept and eaten again and

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slept again. The hollows in their cheeks had filled out, their eyes had lost their fevered glaze.

Dusk was falling over Mars. It was the best time of the day on the Red Planet. Soon night would bring the chilly desert winds. But now the little heat of the day lingered, lending a pleasant warmth to the air.

Red Ambrose sighed. "Looking at us, you wouldn't think that three days ago we—" He gestured toward the horizon.

"Don't mention it," Harden said. "I don't want to ever hear of the place again."

"Oh, I wasn't going to mention it out loud," the engineer said. He raked a horny thumb across the head of a match, applied the light to the end of his cigar. Soon clouds of fragrant smoke were drifting through the thin air.

"Where are you going from here, Harden?" Red Ambrose asked at last. "With that hunk of stuff we found piled up in Keogh's hangout, all put into packing cases and everything, we got enough bucks to do what we please for the rest of our lives. What are you going to do with yours?"

The packing cases that Harden had seen in Keogh's place the first time he had been there had yielded a rich reward. Keogh had already managed to loot a vast hoard of treasure from the temple. He had carefully packed it ready for shipment. Harden and Red Ambrose felt they were logical heirs to it.

"What am I going to do?" Harden mused. "I'm going to visit Earth. I've never been there, you know, and I kind of want to see what the place is like."

There was yearning in his voice, and something of sadness. The green hills of Earth called to him across the depths of space. He would see them, see the whole planet. There was pleasure in the thought. But there was another thought in his mind, and it brought sadness.

Red Ambrose sensed what his companion was thinking. It was something the engineer would never mention. Harden had come here looking for a girl. And had not found her.

"Ah, well—" Ambrose said. "Ah, well—" He looked up. Then rose hastily to his feet.

Marion Gray had come out on the terrace. Harden drew out a chair for her and she sat down. She lit a cigarette, looked silently out over the city to the desert.

"I suppose," she said at last, "you will soon be leaving for Earth?"

"Yes, yes," Harden answered. "That is my plan."

He liked this girl, he liked her better than any girl he had ever known, except one. He liked her for what she was. He liked her in spite of the fact that she had never chosen to explain what she was really doing here, why she had gone to Keogh in the first place. It was a delicate subject, one on which he did not feel justified in asking questions. If she chose to tell him, all right. If she chose to keep silent, all right.

"I don't suppose I could interest you in staying on Mars a little longer?" she suddenly asked.

"You might," Harden answered. "This is not exactly a healthy place for me, but you might interest me in staying a little longer, if you are good at persuading."

HE SPOKE lightly, his voice a slow drawl in the gathering dusk. Leaning back in his chair, he took a slow drag at his cigarette, watched the girl from eyes that were careful not to let her know he was watching her.

She smoked in silence. "I've got a

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job to do here," she said at last.

"A job?"

"Yes." She snubbed the cigarette in the tray. "A job. I need someone to help me do it." She looked straight at Harden. "Not just anyone can help. The man I need to help me must be trustworthy, and strong, and able to keep his mouth shut."

Red Ambrose, listening, rumbled in his throat, but said nothing. Harden kept silent, too. It was coming now. She was going to talk. She was going to tell him what she was doing here. He wanted to know. Knowing this was desperately important to him.

"I want a guide," she said suddenly. "That was one reason why I went to Keogh, because I wanted a guide."

"A guide?" Harden choked. "A guide?"

"Yes. A guide who will take me into the land of serenity!"

Harden sat up in his chair, his eyes darting around the terrace to see if anyone had overheard her. Red Ambrose dropped his cigar and his hand dived into his pocket. There were certain things you did not mention on Mars. The land of serenity was one of them. And you never under any circumstances expressed a desire to go there.

"Why," Harden whispered, "why, if I may ask, do you want to go there?"

It was the last place on Mars where anyone in his senses would want to go.

"I want to find someone who is there," the girl imperturbably answered.

"Someone who is there!"

"Yes."

"And who," Harden tried desperately to keep his voice calm, "and who is this person you are seeking?"

"A man," the girl answered. "A man by the name of Turner."

Red Ambrose almost swallowed his cigar. "By gad, Turner! By gad, Harden. By the Lord Harry, Harden! Can it be possible? Can it *be* possible?" He was pounding on the table with his fist.

"I want you to guide me into—you know where—and help me find Jimmy Turner," the girl continued. "Will you do it?"

Harden forced himself to control his voice. "Marion Gray," he whispered. "Marion Gray. By gad, it fits! I wonder, I wonder, Miss Gray, if you were ever known by the name of Marcia Groner? The initials are the same and—"

Startled surprise showed in the girl's eyes. "Why, yes," she said. "But how—I escaped from the—from you know where myself. That's why I came back here, to find the man I love. The business about the Ph.D. was all fake. I was really trying to— But how—how *—how did you know my name?"*

Harden's fingers went along his cheek, feeling of the scar, wondering how much that had changed his appearance. And he wondered if blonde hair could not be dyed red, and if freckles could not be removed?

"It won't be necessary for you ever to go into the—you know where, Marcia. Not now. Not ever. I'm Jimmy Turner, and I came back to Mars to try to rescue you, just as you came back to try to rescue me."

There was wonder in her eyes. The wonder grew and grew. Harden would always remember the wonder in her eyes, and the bounding flip-flop of his heart as she came into his arms.

Red Ambrose looked at them. And grinned and grinned. And then stole quietly away.

A SOLDIER GIVES HIS LIFE—YOU GIVE ONLY MONEY!

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THE MAN WHO

By William Lawrence Hamling

Illustrated by Julian S. Krupa

DOC SLATER was sitting half-asleep when the door to his private office burst open. A short pudgy man straddled the threshold. His eyes were bulging and sweat glistened in beads on his face.

"Doc!" he cried in a high piping voice. "You gotta get rid of this thing for me—it's drivin' me nuts!"

Doc Slater stared at his visitor over the edge of his horn-rimmed spectacles. Then he frowned. It was Butch Mullens, late baron of the Bartender's Union. Butch had been muscled out by Gus Braumberg, the new keyman of the rackets. It was dangerous having Mullens in his office. Somebody might have seen him come in. And if they did, it meant that Gus Braumberg would find out. And that meant trouble.

It was none of Doc Slater's business what went on in the Underworld, but he did know a lot more than some of the wise boys let on. He knew some things that weren't too healthy to know. For instance that Butch Mullens' number was up. Butch didn't know it, but Doc Slater did. He even knew that the only reason Mullens was still alive was that Gus Braumberg wanted to get his hands on the cache Butch had stored away during his reign as Beer Baron. Butch was a doomed man—even as he stood there, Doc knew.

"I tell ya, Doc, ya gotta help me—ya gotta do somethin'!" Butch slammed the door behind him. He fairly threw himself on Doc Slater. Doc got up and steered him into a chair.

"Take it easy, Butch, you're white as a sheet. Now tell me what this is all about."

Butch looked like he would jump from the chair. He gulped hysterically and something in his neck jumped. He clutched at it frenziedly.

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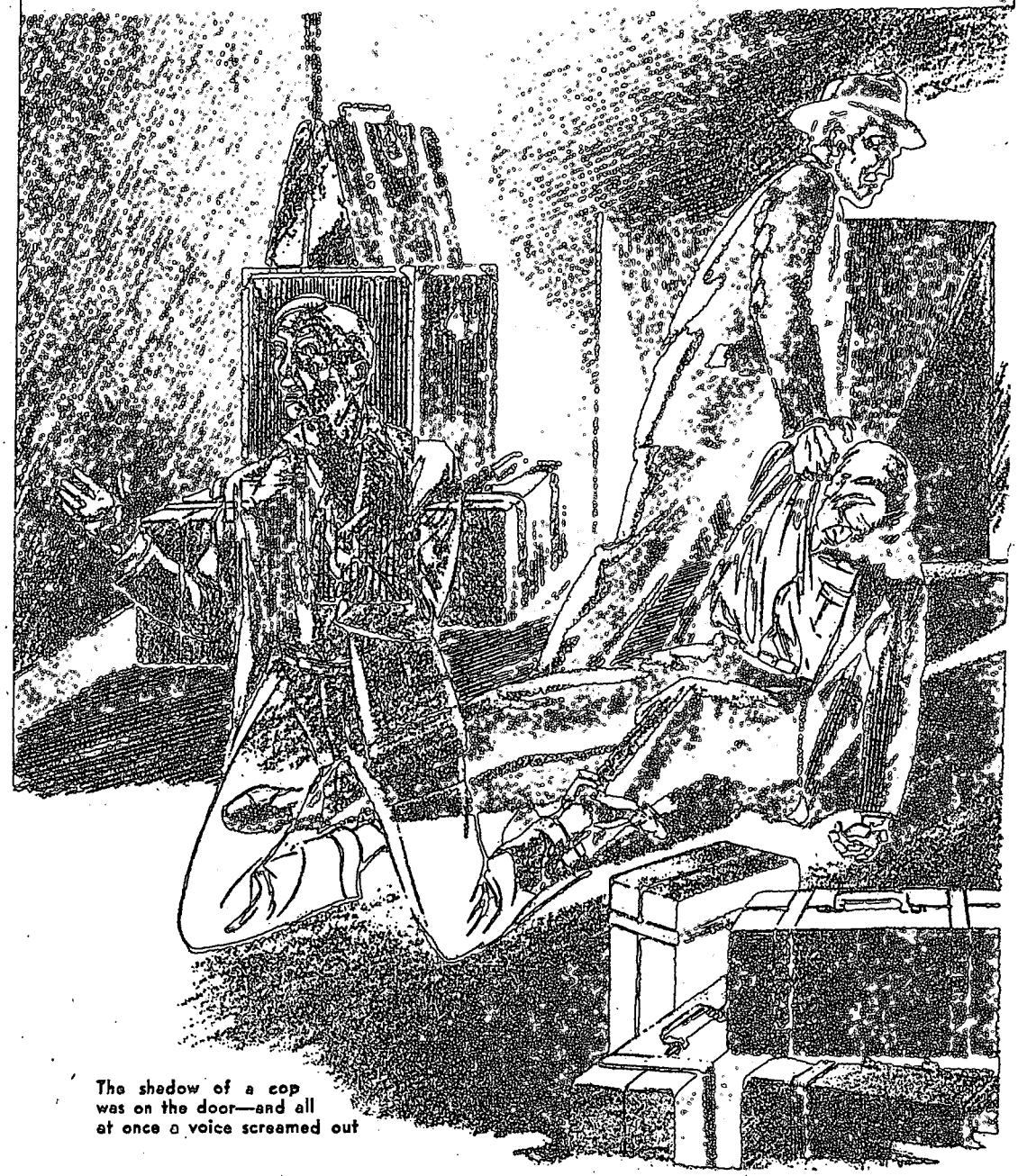
SPOKE TOO LATE



The shadow of a cop was on the door—and all at once a voice screamed out

Butch Mullens had an operation designed to make his disguise perfect. It didn't work out as plannod; but it brought justice all around!

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"It's this thing, Doc—this!" He grabbed at the wildly jumping blob of matter in his throat and managed to slow it down somewhat. Doc stared at it. It was Butch's adam's apple. But what an adam's apple! It resembled a pylon stuck loosely in the middle of the Empire State Building. And when Butch talked in his high piping voice it bobbed up and down like an express-elevator gone berserk. Butch looked like he would have a fit any second. He grabbed at the elusive jumping blob somewhere between his chin and shoulder blades and swore.

"Damn it, Doc, I can't stand it any longer. This thing is drivin' me nuts! It's got me tagged in every bull book from here to Frisco. It's gettin' so's I can't show my face anywhere. And not only the bulls—but Braumberg too! And all because this damned freak of creation stands out in my craw like a lily on a rosebush. I can't hide, I can't do nothin'—every time I dye my hair or grow a beard so's even my old lady wouldn't know me—this thing and my squeakin' pipes give me away. Doc, you gotta help me, I'll pay plenty. I'll pay ya anything ya want—look . . ."

He groped wildly in his coat pocket and brought out a fistful of bills. He shoved them under Doc Slater's nose. Doc was favorably impressed. But still he hesitated.

If Gus Braumberg found out . . . Doc looked again at the tempting greenbacks.

"Of course," he said slowly, "such an operation, Laryngotomy, to remove that thyroid cartilage and to adjust your vocal chords to change the tone of your voice—may have serious complications."

"Nothin could make me worse off than the way I am now!" Butch piped shrilly. His adam's apple leaped upward at every word until it seemed it would knock out his teeth.

Doc Slater rubbed his nose and adjusted his spectacles. He walked over to the window and peered out. The morning sun shone down upon a street empty but for a solitary loafer leaning against a lamp post on the corner. Then Doc looked once more at the bills Butch Mullens clutched in his fingers.

"Very well," he said. "I'll do it, but you've got to follow my instructions implicitly."

"Sure thing, Doc," Butch piped jubilantly. "Anything ya say. How long will it take?"

Doc Slater rubbed his jaw.

"You can leave sometime this afternoon. But I don't want you to do much talking for awhile after the operation. Your vocal chords may be weak for awhile. And too, by changing the tone of your voice I'll have to readjust your larynx to slow down your voice vibrations. You shouldn't have any bad effects except a sore throat. Just don't use your voice if you can help it for a day or so."

"O.K. Doc," piped Butch, shedding his coat. "Let's get it done. . . ."

BUTCH MULLENS left Doc Slater's office late that afternoon. He felt like a new man, sauntering down the steps with a swagger he hadn't been able to muster since the old days when he was the racket boss. But Butch didn't care about the old days now. He was thinking about the days ahead. With the fifty G's in his pocket he could start fresh someplace else. And to hell with the cops and Gus Braumberg. So they thought they had him tagged for good with that damned adam's apple! Butch felt cautiously around his neck where the bandage was fastened. He half expected to feel the sharp pointed eruption that had made his life miserable. But there wasn't any sharp

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pointed eruption. He sauntered off down the street to where he had parked his car.

When he reached the huge structure of the Union Terminal, Butch left his car double-parked. He didn't care what happened to it now. All he cared about was that there was no longer a choking blob of matter in his throat that jumped whenever he spoke. Butch couldn't keep his hands away from the bandage as he walked through the foyer of the depot. It felt good. It felt so darned good that Butch would have liked to dance if he knew how. And outside of a sore throat, as Doc said, he wouldn't have known he'd had an operation. He fished out his ticket and glanced across it. His train was waiting on track 5.

Butch glanced idly around the depot. Then suddenly he stiffened. A cop was walking slowly his way. Butch recognized him. It was Clancy. And Butch got nervous. Clancy musn't see him.

Butch hurried away from that vicinity. He suddenly found himself before a cigar counter. A pretty blonde number smiled at him.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Butch fumbled around in his pocket for some loose change.

"Gimme a couple Havanas," he tried to say. He tried to say it again. But his voice was only a hoarse whisper. Then he remembered what Doc Slater had said. Something about slowed vibrations and not to use his voice for a couple of days. Butch shrugged and tossed a quarter on the till pointing to the box of cigars on the display. The girl pushed it toward him and he picked out two. They were five centers. Butch hurried away without waiting for his change. The girl looked after him, rang up the sale and pocketed the tip. Then she turned back to the counter. But there were no other customers. She went back to reading her "Love Novel of the Month" when suddenly a gruff voice said:

"Gimme a couple Havanas."

The girl dropped her magazine and turned to the counter smiling. It was empty. She glanced swiftly around her, frowning. But there wasn't a person within twenty yards of the cigar stand.

BUTCH MULLENS made his way toward track 5. His train was due out in fifteen minutes. And in fifteen minutes he'd kiss good-bye to Braumberg and the cops.

He paused beside a glazed door which read: "Baggage Room" and lit one of the cigars. Turning, he suddenly found someone in his way. He stepped aside, but the other person continued to block him. Then he glanced upward. A pair of watery eyes smiled at him. Butch's stomach did flip-flops. For Gus Braumberg was shoving something hard into it.

"Surprised, eh Butch?" Gus smiled evilly. "Didn't expect to see me, did you!" The something pressed harder into Butch's mid-section. "Thought you'd pull a powder with all that dough you stole from my Union. Thought you'd fool me without that landmark in your craw. Well, you haven't fooled anyone but yourself!"

Butch was terrified. He felt his knees melting beneath him. Gus Braumberg shoved harder into Butch's stomach. With his free hand he twisted the knob of the glass door.

"Inside!" he rapped. "Come on, move!"

Butch moved. Behind him Gus Braumberg slammed the door of the baggage room shut. Butch found himself facing a wicked snub-nosed automatic with a silencer attached. His heart crept into his mouth. Gus Braumberg continued to smile.

"And now, Butch, we'll settle our

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little score for keeps!"

Butch didn't like the look in Braumberg's eye. He glanced down and liked even less the way Gus' finger was curled around the trigger of the gun. Butch glanced up wildly. God! What he wouldn't give for a cop now! His eyes focused helplessly on the glazed door behind Braumberg. A shadow fell across it. The shadow of a uniform Butch knew only too well. It was Clancy passing. Butch looked once more at the trigger of the gun Gus was clutching. He tried to scream.

"Stop! Gus, wait! For God's sake put that gun away—don't shoot—I'll give you the money—don't shoot—don't shoot!" But only hoarse sounds issued from his throat.

"What's the matter, Butch, cat get your tongue?" Gus spoke acidly. Then his finger tightened on the trigger. There were three dull plops. Then there was a louder plop. The loud plop was Butch falling. He fell at Gus's feet and a red stream welled out over the floor. Gus stooped. His fingers found a thick wad of bills in Butch's pocket. He stuffed them into his own spilling a few on the floor in his haste. Then he grabbed Butch by the shoulders and dragged him over to one of the baggage shoots. He grunted.

"A damn nice job if I do say so. And no one will be the wiser!"

The uniformed shadow passed over the glass door again and faded. But Gus didn't see it. He wouldn't have cared anyway. He was too busy stuffing Butch's body into the baggage chute. But suddenly Gus froze. Behind him a series of hoarse screams rent the air.

"Stop! Gus, wait! For God's sake put that gun away—don't shoot—I'll give you the money—don't shoot—don't shoot!"

Gus wheeled and Butch's body fell back to the floor. The gun clattered beside him. Then the door burst open and Clancy rushed in, gun in hand. He stopped, staring at Gus and the body on the floor.

"Who screamed?" Clancy glanced from the body to Gus and then back to the body. Gus was shaking.

"I—I don't k-know. . ."

Clancy glanced at the bills on the floor. He glanced at Gus Braumberg. He glanced at Butch's body and the blood. Then he glanced at a snub-nosed automatic with a silencer, lying next to the baggage chute. That was enough for Clancy, screams or no screams.

"O.K. Braumberg—move! We've got a nice little cell we've been keeping for you down at Headquarters. And after that a nice comfortable little chair. Move!"

Gus moved. But as he moved he glanced back at Butch. Butch's dead eyes stared unseeing up at Gus. He was dead. And yet, Gus thought he heard a chuckle—or was it a death rattle? Had he actually seen the bandage on Gus' neck quiver? Doc Slater might have told him. . . .

OIL FOR BOMBING

OPENING of a new aviation gasoline refinery on Aruba by the Lago Oil Company, Standard Oil of New Jersey subsidiary, was cited by Governor Pieter A. Kasteel of Curacao as the latest example of "the splendid cooperation between the United States and the Netherlands for the prosecution of the war."

Speaking at the opening ceremony, the Governor said: "Lago Oil will continue to be most important for our whole territory, for the prosecution of the war and the development of our common task after victory is won. You supply in ever-increasing quantities the vital fuel without which Allied planes cannot fly. It is all a question of team-work—you over here and the airmen over there working together with all your might to crush forever the ugly monsters of Hitlerism and Japanese aggression."

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READER'S PAGE

HOUSEHOLD FIXTURE

Sirs:

Today I bought my first copy of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. How I ever reached the ripe old age of twenty-one without reading it before, I don't know, but I can assure you F.A. will be a permanent fixture in this household from now on.

I absolutely jelled in broad daylight when I read Thorne Lee's, "The Man Who Lost His Shadow." More stories by Mr. Lee, please.

I saw many criticisms on the "Reader's Page," but being a brand new S.F. follower I can find nothing wrong. Not being a scientific hound, I don't look for errors and just love the way the stories carry you out of this world.

I think F.A. is tops.

Mrs. Eddie Reginato
2428 Bancroft Way, Apt. 6
Berkeley 4, Calif.

Lee will be back, never fear!—Ed.

HE ASKS QUESTIONS

Sirs:

I am 17 years old and this is my first fan letter. I have been interested in science fiction since I have been able to read. I have read many science mags, and yours is best. I am sorry to say that not many people I know around this community are interested in science fiction.

Now for the stories. All of them are good but I don't believe in time machines. I don't say it is impossible but I don't understand how it could be done. However you publish some interesting stories about time machines. Also, the covers should match the stories.

I am interested in hypnotism and mental powers. How about a few stories on this and how about a mind reading machine? I would like to know if there is any known way to neutralize gravity, even on a small scale?

It would be nice if F.A. carried a page devoted to the answering of scientific questions asked by readers. Also I would be glad to pay a little more for trimmed edges if this were possible.

And one thing more. I don't think the stories are fantastic at all. Just a few years or even months ahead of what is really to come. So all I can say is keep up the good work.

James Shelton
Adolphus, Ky.

Here is one time machine that we could suggest that travels through time—a space ship which builds up its speed constantly until it surpasses the speed of light (not at all impossible according to new scientific theory and observations as to the speed of certain sub-electrons). Thus, we could travel to a distant star, train a telescope on Earth, and see events that took place many years before our start. Then, returning to Earth, our traveler could condense the events that occurred between that time and his own time, according to the speed he traveled.

We have quite a few stories about hypnotism and mental powers. You'll find them in future issues too. Doesn't an airplane neutralize gravity? Don't you neutralize it when you lift something up? Certain magnetic tricks are common, in which a piece of metal is caused to float in the air by opposing like poles of magnets.—Ed.

HOW THE EDITOR WORKS

Sirs:

You never cease to surprise me. Reading The Editor's Notebook I find that you have to type all the letters over yourself. It is no wonder my letters never reach the Reader's Page. I can easily see that you don't want to waste your time translating my messages only to find that they are meaningless.

The same old line-up of authors as usual I see—not that I don't enjoy them, but what are the chances of getting a few different writers to break up the monotony?

When the letters in the Reader's Page get to be more interesting than the stories, I think you ought to do something about it. I'm refering, of course, to that soul-stirring classic by Dwight Lane. Let's have a sequel, Mr. Lane.

In the April FA, Manfred Baskin suggested forming a book club. I would be interested in joining it. If such a club was formed, I have a few suggestions for S-F classics you could print.

There's a little argument between a school friend and myself as how the name of Fuqua, the artist, is pronounced. We don't know; would you be so good as to settle this thing? While I'm on artists I don't like Paul for covers, but his inside illustrations are swell. With McCauley it's the other way around. I like his covers, but sometimes there isn't enough action in his inside pics. Take for example the one for "Time on Your Hands." (Maybe that one doesn't need any.)

And for goodness sake, when the war's over, go back to once-a-month.

William Vietinghoff
General Delivery
Terrell Wells, Texas

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BUY WAR BONDS

the Reader's Page? Since we have 50 characters to the line, we re-type all letters to be used in that width, leaving space for editorial answers below. Then we type the answer same width. This issue, we have space for 619 lines of copy. So we count lines till we get to 619 and then quit with a sigh of relief. Since we get ten words to the line, we must type 6,190 words for this column, which is the average short story. Add up the lines the editor writes (Editorial, etc.) each month, and you'll see we produce a few words each year even if we aren't authors! What do you mean, same old authors? This month we have Barclay, West, Shelton, Deegan, Hamling—none of whom appear very often, and three of whom are new! Fuqua is pronounced "few-kwa." Yes, we will go monthly the instant the war is over, and maybe before.—Ed.

MACHINE-GUN PRAISE

Sirs:

Flowers to Pollard, Lee and Wilcox for delightful reading.

Brickbats to Casey. Was that awful thing supposed to be funny? No more, please.

Give me Paul on back, St. John on front, and Magarian inside. Sheer heaven!

For stories, more Lee, Wilcox, Yerxa, Bloch, O'Brien, Williams and last but not least, Bond.

Glad to hear "Letter to Ed" was just a gag. We'd hate to lose you.

I think the club is a swell idea, and I'm looking forward to the day F.A. becomes a monthly.

Mrs. Fred Reeves
Box 1296
Marysville, Calif.

You certainly shot the comment at us! Thanks a million for all those kind words in that rapid-fire manner.—Ed.

SCORE FOUR!

Sirs:

FA is no stereotyped album of dry S-F, as are some other magazines I have read. Score one.

Ye Ed. (bless his bones) has managed a subtle but continual injection of new blood in the author's box to prevent reprinting. But if reprinting is done, it's the best. Score two.

The Reader's Page, done up in a real democratic way, scores third on the editor's ability to take it.

Now, if the Maestro, methinks, changes a few sour notes and keeps the class S-F, then it'll continue being strictly A-1!

I would hereby like to expand a bit on one point that always warms my plasma several degrees. Many readers take advantage of the Reader's Page to mercilessly pan the editor, when it is only his efforts that lets their punitive missives greet the light of day. I admit that everyone can't be pleased, but why not just forward those searing missiles to Tokio?

Also, the editor's notes in said column often keep it from falling to pieces. Congrats.

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Looks like you hit the jackpot with Thorne Lee. He may have weak spots, but that boy knows his stuff!

As for Wilcox, he hit a new high, but of what, I don't know. Sounds a bit weird and bizarre.

Norman Berkshire
713 West Hubbard Ave.
Elkhart, Indiana

And we print your letter—score four! Naturally we agree with your scoring, and we get a warm glow concerning them kind comments about our own work. As for those letters panning us, we run an open column and everybody is welcome. We never consider whether or not a letter is flattering or not—if it is interesting enough to go in—in it is.—Ed.

A THOROUGH ANALYSIS!

Sirs:

In waiting for April F.A. to appear I have gone back in my F.A. and A.S. files and have been reading over many of the letters from the fans.

Two points seemed to impress themselves on my mind from the letters and from my reactions on stories and art.

1. If we read the papers—listen to the radio or go to the movies, our three closest companions, all we read, hear or see is war. We all have friends or relatives in the war and I for one try to forget the war when I try to relax. If I want to read about the war I would buy war stories, but when I try to relax I pick up a fantasy to take up my mind and transport it to restful dreaming. Now I can't say that your stories are all war but I do wish that the war would not even be thought about in F.A. *Of course this doesn't go for A.S.* Also I realize that I am only speaking for myself on this and not for the majority of your many readers. I have noticed this mentioned in only one or two of the letters you have printed so I guess we who dislike this are few.

2. This is another point which I want you to know that I speak for myself alone and I am not trying to tell you that everyone else thinks as I do.

If I owned F.A. and A.S. as made to please me alone, I would use Paul straight through in A.S. except for human figures. He can draw them okay when small, but when it comes to a full page size human he's not there. In F.A. I would use Finlay straight through. One thing *I* can't understand is how anybody can compare Magarian with Finlay. His work is really beautiful. Paul on covers or interiors fairly oozes amazing places and Finlay's works almost live any fantasy ever written. I have all of Merritt's works in mag. form illustrated by Finlay which is a real treasure in fantasy.

Of course I do understand, that in catering to the public, you *must* print variety in stories and art to stay alive.

One other thing is distinct in my mind from reading F.A. and A.S., and that is when I like a Don Wilcox story, it is tops and when I dislike it, it's really bad (of course only in my opinion).

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4. MAGIC RULER—A 6-inch ruler with hole in center, is inserted in a fancy slotted cover between the covers. A metal fastener locks ruler between covers, but the magician removes the ruler promptly. Solid through solid effect! Ruler and cover, also fastener, may be examined. Astonishing!
5. E-Z MONEY VANISHER—Coins, bills, small articles appear or disappear with this clever device. No skill required. Change a penny into a dollar and vice versa.
6. FOOLED AGAIN—A comedy card trick that fools all! One red and two black cards are shown. The red card suddenly disappears and is found in the magician's pocket or under the rug, etc. The original red card changes to a card reading "Fooled" on one side and "Fooled Again" on other side.
7. RED DEVILS—Three red discs are thrown on table by magician. One of the discs is placed in his pocket with right hand and the other two picked up in his left. Yet, when his left hand is opened, it contains THREE DICE. Can be repeated!
8. MYSTIC TAGS—Three tags, colored red, white and blue, are given to spectator, also a string. Spectator is asked to thread tags through top holes, and hold both ends of string. Magician removes center white tag without tearing it. A great stunt!
9. MAGIC RATTLE BARS—Three bars are shown. One rattles, two don't. They are mixed around and spectator is asked to tell which rattles, but ALWAYS fails! This trick alone usually sells for $1.00. It's a honey!
10. AGAINST GRAVITY!—A handkerchief is spread over a board and then two ordinary burrowed drinking glasses placed upon it. Magician turns the board upside down but glasses do not drop. One glass may be removed but other still remains in position. A most mystifying trick but E-Z to do with our secret apparatus.

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Since F.A. started, to now, I can put 3 stories above all the rest as giving me great pleasure—the first Whispering Gorilla story "The Whispering Gorilla" by Don Wilcox—"Doorway to Hell" by Frank Patton and "The Man With Five Lives" by Clyde Woodruff. Also I have a very warm place in my heart for Lefty Feep.

Since you took over A.S. in 1938 I have read and kept score on each issue. I will list the 15 top stories in my opinion in that period of time. The first 5 I like best, the rest are not in any special order.

1. "Earth Stealers"—Don Wilcox.
2. "Hidden Universe"—R. M. Farley.
3. "Phoney Meteor"—J. Beynon.
4. "The New Adam"—Stanley Weinbaum.
5. "Voyage That Lasted 600 Years"—Don Wilcox.
6. "Locked City"—Thornton Ayre.
7. "I, Robot"—E. and O. Binder.
8. "Battle of the Dawn"—Manley Wade Wellman.
9. "Strange Flight of Richard Clayton"—Robert Bloch.
10. "Where is Roger Davis?"—David V. Reed.
11. "Sons of the Deluge"—Nelson S. Bond.
12. "Scientific Pioneer"—Nelson S. Bond.
13. "Strange Voyage of Dr. Penwing"—R. O. Lewis.
14. "Last Analysis"—John York Cabot.
15. "Black World"—A. R. Steber.

All of these still write except A. R. Steber, whatever became of him?

I also have kept track of your covers both front and back. All the back covers on both mags were and are fine except Paul's "Gods."

The front covers were usually good but lately (with a few good ones in between) they have been no good. That is, the art work is fine but they do not go with the title of the magazine. *Amazing Stories* denotes something unusual. Now a half-naked woman is very attractive but does not belong on A.S. It goes fine on or in F.A. but not A.S. A.S. covers should be all gadget and small if any humans. Take like the Jan. 1944 issue for instance:—The back cover depicting a scene from "Phantom City of Luna" was one of the best covers you ever printed. It was typically amazing. The front on "The Mad Robot" was good too. If I want to find another good one I have to go back to March, 1943, for the "Metal Monster" cover. Don't get me wrong but I love the *Mac* girl, but only on F.A. I think I like her on the "Earthquake Girl" cover best.

Also, I think that the best A.S. cover ever used was that one used for "Battering Rams of Space." It was really an amazing piece of art work; but none of these artists are as consistent as Paul. And his stuff is good where others do good and rotten work.

All in all, though, I enjoy both of these magazines.

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Do you plan to publish another special "Flying" after the "Army Air Forces At War" issue?

Tony Riccardi
5718 So. Gramercy Pl.
Los Angeles 37, Calif.

As for war stories, we have several more on tap, but they will all run in the next issue. We have some really terrific non-war stuff to follow and we've secured it because so many of you have told us to lay off the war stuff. Your lists of favorite stories is very interesting, and we know the authors you selected will be very flattered. We believe you have selected very well. On covers, your comments are very interesting. As a matter of fact, we try to provide infinite variety in both subject matter and artist. You will get plenty of gadget covers as well as lovely girl covers, so so on. As for A. R. Steber, he has a short coming up in a future issue of Amazing Stories, *which you might like to read. We should think a reader as long in the field as you would have learned about your editor's dabblings in fiction under that pen-name. Actually he's not as good as you seem to think—he has to put so much effort into a yarn, which is why he writes so little. We believe that* Flying *will continue to lead the aviation field, and that means special issues, of course. Each one will be announced prominently so that you won't miss it.—Ed.*

ENJOYMENT

Sirs:

I am writing to you to inform you of all the enjoyment I've gotten out of F.A. I have read every issue of F.A. I could possibly get for the last five years and whenever I'm in the dumps I can always trust F.A. to take my mind off my troubles; thus far I've never been disappointed. I took this as my last chance to write to you. I shall join the fleet soon.

It's been quite sometime now since I had my last F.A. but I somehow managed to get hold of one, so you can imagine how much it means to me. I'll never forget some of the stories I have read in both F.A. and A.S. Such as "Skeleton Men of Jupiter" and "The Ice Queen."

A. L. Dugan, s 2/c A.R.M.
N.A.G.S.
Hollywood, Fla.

Naturally we're tickled to know you get so much pleasure out of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. *We hope you can continue to secure copies, even while at sea. A subscription would follow you; why not try it? At least, they'd pile up at home, and you'd have them to read when you get back. Back issues will be impossible to get, because of paper shortages which make reserve supplies impossible. —Ed.*

A CONFESSION?

Sirs:

It is really quite amazing how the human mind reacts under different circumstances and the influence of other environments. Apply a certain

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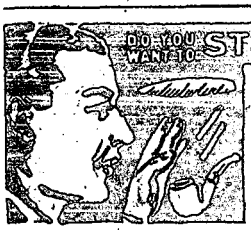
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amount of stress to it, in the form of worry, anxiety, and add a dash of frustated self preservation and (I bow my head in shame) the thin veneer of civilization, that has elevated us above the beast wears off. In my mind's eye, my dear mag-editor, I can see you even as you read this, trying to formulate a plan, whereby, through the medium of the authorities, you can revenge yourself, with a quick coup d'etat, on the person, who on Nov. 9, 1943, caused you much discomfort, by causing, as you describe it, "a large goose egg to appear on the back of your skull." I regret to say, however, that I had expected far more different results. As luck would have it though, I, being a novice in this field, did not achieve my goal. For this I am now thankful. I hope you will not feel too badly toward me, sir, and that you will understand, to some extent, that which I am about to relate to you.

Far to the south of Chicago and its Loop, lies a military reservation of the army of the United States. There experimental work, of a nature not to be divulged, was taking place. Somehow it interfered with the mechanism of my "machine," which incidentally was set for 1865 even though I knew it would never reach there, with its living passenger. I found myself experiencing a sensation, heretofore unreal. As this phenomena grew stronger, I felt my body seemingly grow numb. Starting at my feet it worked its way upward. I felt my body growing weaker as if all energy was being drained from it. I had an overpowering desire to sleep. I tried to fight it off, but, nevertheless, I lost consciousness as a ringing sensation was noticed in my ears. I awoke to find myself in a hospital where I stayed for seven days. I was told that during the experiment, the meters being used suddenly went to their maximum. There was a blinding flash, as unharnessed electrons jumped from one conductor to another, and then as though being angry at being so long confined, to all other objects in the room. I had head phones on at the time and received a great physical as well as mental shock. I seemed to remember being a soldier in your armed forces, and as the days went by, it became clearer in my mind. Too I remember being the "Secretary of Science," in the Cabinet of the United States, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt IV. But this last with greater clarity than the former. You ask me to explain it? Please do not be unfair. But, I will surmise this much. There will be a Scott Feldman in the year 1970, just as there is a Paul Bleuchmp in your armed forces, in the year 1943, but under the guidance of a different mind than it had formerly, with vague memories of a home, which to his knowledge he has never seen. Did the body of Scott Feldman, as it hurled to its doom in 1941, have these same visions, with vagueness and clarity, in reverse order? I for one do not know. But this I do know. When the stiffness had disappeared from my body and I can use it, with the dexterity with which it was intended to be used, I will search through the records for some unexplained

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cataclysmic accident of 1941, that may in some way satisfy my curiosity. I think I may, to some extent, satisfy your own curiosity in regard to that plastic button you have in your possession. It is not an unknown plastic, but an improvement over a plastic you yourself are using in everyday life. Before closing, I would like to call your attention to a date which you will long remember, and which I know as history. The date—Jan. 2, 1944.

I hope you found my letter interesting, sir, but of course all the happenings are pure fantasy, and exist only in my mind, for everyone knows such things don't happen—or do they?

Paul Bleuchmp
Camp Crowder, Missouri

Maybe they do! Anyway, thanks for a neat little story for the Reader's Page.—Ed.

LIKES WEIRDLY IMPOSSIBLE

Sirs:

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES takes my mind off of daily cares, and for that reason I like the weirdly impossible stories. No realistic stuff for me. No war stories. Just more magic and mysticism. The scientific articles are good reading so long as they have an air of mystery about them. The stories of interplanetary flights and of unknown planets are, to me, uninteresting, but I do like the semi-scientific tales of worlds which may be hidden in our known world, like the one in "Man From the Magic River." Let's have more like that!

Mrs. E. E. Lovett
Route 6, Box 27L
So. Jacksonville 7, Florida

We'll certainly have plenty of your kind of story in the future. You aren't the only one who likes them!—Ed.

WEST? IN THIS ISSUE!

Sirs:

I have been looking forward to other stories in FANTASTIC by Wallace West, like or similar to the one in the February issue. I like those kind of stories, and seems to be a lot in that one. It is fanciful, but of course there is much back of the fancy.

There is a building near me where the Boy Scouts meet, and I have talked with some of them, and they are all for your class of stories, as they are instructive as well as fanciful and mysterious.

Also liked the ghost story in that number, "The Place Is Familiar," by David Wright O'Brien.

Yours for more good stories.

Elvia B. Scott
411 Broadway
Cincinnati, Ohio

Then you ought to like the story in this issue by Wallace West! Your comment about the Boy Scouts is interesting, and we're glad to know this great organization's members in your locality approve of our fiction.—Ed.

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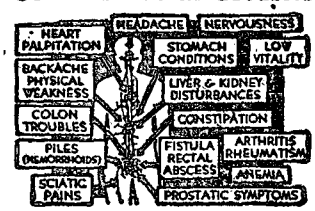

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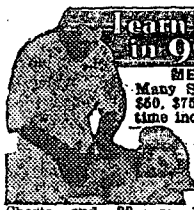

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NO BACK ISSUES!

Sirs:

My horror-stricken eyes gazed in terror at the unbelievable scene before me. "No!" I screamed, "You can't, you can't!" I leaped forward, and received a blow on the head. The men before me grabbed the shimmering beauty on the table. I refer, of course, to Dwight Lane of N. Carolina, and the last copy of FANTASTIC. My shoulders drooping, I staggered dejectedly over the bodies and through the bloody doorway. Half the United States had I traversed, looking for an issue. Now, I shuddered and boarded the bus back to Cleveland.

I stumbled into the drugstore on my block and dropped into a stool.

"Hey, stupe, where were ya? I been savin' this fer days." He brought forth a copy of—no! Yes! FANTASTIC ADVENTURES!

So here I am!

Topic: FANTASTIC ADVENTURES (as if you didn't know).

1st choice: "Lefty Feep Does Time"—Why don't you let us see what he looks like?

2nd choice: "A Horse on Thorndyke."

3rd choice: "Return of Jongor."

All the rest were tie.

Would you mind printing the prices with the back issues of AMAZING and FANTASTIC? And do you have any of the quarterlies?

G. Dallas
Cleveland, Ohio

Hey, Dwight Lane, this guy got one too! As for prices on back issues, they are one million dollars each. In other words, there just ain't none! Yep, that's true. We are sorrier than you can imagine, but the paper shortage has created a colossal demand for our magazines, and we absolutely do not have any copies remaining unsold. Your editor should know—because he sadly contemplates his own file incomplete!—Ed.

HERE'S HOPING YOU GET 'EM!

Sirs:

The first FANTASTIC ADVENTURES I read had "The Man from Hell" by Polton Cross in it. From that time on I have been trying to get your two mags. Unfortunately, only from the Oct., '41 issue of F.A. have I been able to get F.A. steadily. I have gotten back issues from you, however I still have many gaps in my collection of F.A. and A.S. I would like to hear from any readers who have the following *Amazings* for sale:

June 1940	Mar. 1941
Sept. 1940	Apr. 1941
Oct. 1940	May 1941
Nov. 1940	June 1941
Dec. 1940	July 1941
Jan. 1941	Sept. 1941
Feb. 1941	

I would also like to get any available Sinister Stories, Strange Stories. As to your last issue it was very good, the Jongor story was the best with "Time on Your Hands" and "A Horse on Thorndyke" close behind. Virgil Finlay and Magarian are your best illustrators. Manfred Baskin

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has a great idea, I agree with him a hundred percent.

Michael Matveyeff
120-05 Graha Court
College Point, N. Y.

While we're at it, your editor would like very much to secure the following issues of Amazing Stories Quarterly.

Winter 1932 Vol. 5 No. 1
Spring 1932 Vol. 5 No. 2
Winter 1933 Vol. 7 No. 1

If any readers have copies they'd care to sell, please quote prices. We would very much like to complete our editorial files.—Ed.

COPIES FOR SALE!

Sirs:

Although I have read your swell mag for four years this is the first time I have written in a few brickbats and bouquets. The present issue brings back a few years ago when you were printing Edgar R. Burroughs' swell "Carson of Venus" yarns and especially that classic by Ray Cummings "Onslaught of the Druid Girls."

Back to the current issue, "Jongor" is a grand story. It easily takes first place. "Time Will Tell" by John York Cabot is second. "Homer and the Herring" is third and "Curse of El Dorado" last.

The illustrations, as usual, are good, especially the pics by Finlay and St. John. The rest were good. Paul's painting for the back cover was grand. Let's have more. Julian is missing this time and he is one artist I would like to see more often.

If this collection of words is lucky enough to get past the Editor's eagle eye and is printed, for the readers that would like to get a few SF books and mags I have a few I would like to trade or sell. Please write me for price list if interested.

My pet hope is for you to get a long novel from Ray Cummings and publish it as soon as possible.

Ned Reece
Box 557, Rt. 2
Kannapolis, N. C.

May your editor put in first bid for the three copies listed in the letter preceding yours? If you have them!—Ed.

MAYBE YOU HAD TO HAUNT THE NEWSSTANDS TO GET THIS COPY OF FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

—IF SO, WE'RE SORRY

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WARRIORS OF OTHER WORLDS

By MORRIS J. STEELE

The actual planet Saturn is a comparatively small body deep beneath its great atmospheric blanket. It is down in the caverns of this central world that its life exists!

(See Back Cover)

IN VOLUME, Saturn is 734 times greater than Earth; and in mass it is 94.9 times greater. Its mean density is 0.715, only about one-eighth that of Earth and less than that of any other planet. Yet the mass of Saturn is so great that its surface gravity averages 1.17 times greater than the gravity on the Earth's surface. Gravity at the poles is about 30 percent greater than at the equator. Due to its rapid rotation, it is conspicuously oblate.

It follows from the rate of rotation of Saturn and its oblateness that its mass must be largely condensed toward its center. Thus we find that the actual planet is much smaller than its apparent diameter, the greater proportion of it being tenuous atmosphere.

The planet inclines in the plane of its orbit by 26°45′. Consequently it has marked seasons, which are moderated by its distance from the sun. It is possible also that the atmosphere provides a blanket which still further modifies them. Yet, there probably is a great range of temperature on the surface.

Actual solid surface gravity conditions may be similar to Earth's, or even a bit less. We might find that an Earthman could move about with great ease, contrary to the popular opinion that he would be crushed by his own weight. This is an error that has been fostered by science fiction writers.

Due to its rapid rotation, we may assume that the planet core is in a state much different from that of Earth. It is less a cohesive mass, and subject to volcanic and earthquake upheavals which may have resulted in a chaotic subsurface network of caverns. It is most probable that it is in the depths of these caverns that we will find the life forms of the planet Saturn.

On the back cover of this issue artist Malcolm Smith has reproduced his conception of the sort of caverns that honeycomb the planet, and the sort of life that might inhabit them.

He has visualized a vast ramification of caverns of beautiful sapphire appearance, built up to fantastic forms by stalagmites and stalactites. Since the density of Saturn is much less than that of Earth, we would find less metallic and stone formation than the lighter elements in crystal form. These would permit fantastic formations which would be shattered under their own weight on Earth, but which would assume architectural shapes almost unbelievable in these caves.

The natural inhabitant of Saturn's caves, artist Smith believes, would be a lizard-like creature quite frog-like in appearance, inasmuch as it would have two agile hind legs with which it could leap about fantastically in the caverns, and two front tentacles which would be capable of wrapping about stalactites and stalagmites and aiding it in making its trapeze-artist way about the caves. It would possess rudimentary eyes, perhaps filmed over to protect their sensitive retinae from damaging light, while they actually see their way about the caves by the lower wavelengths of the infrared and perhaps even the very high wavelengths of the x-ray.

They would live partly on smaller lizards and on fish which they would be adept at catching in the underground streams and lakes. Thus they would have sharp, tearing teeth, quite dangerous to anyone who chooses to do battle with them.

However, their greatest danger would be in the electrical "stings" in their fore-tentacles. They would possess a charge similar to the Earth sting-ray, capable of knocking a victim down so that they could tear at vital spots with their sharp teeth.

The surface inhabitant of Saturn, who would be partially a denizen of the upper caves and the outer crust of the planet, would quite likely be human, very much like ourselves, because of the duplication of Earth conditions on the inner planet. Because of the difference in atmosphere, he would be different, especially in lung formation, having to neutralize and filter otherwise deadly poisons from the air he breathes. He might also be protected from acid-character atmosphere by an armor suit of some acid-resisting metal, probably coated with gold or some such soft metal.

His is a rigorous planet, and battle would be natural to him, even for the females. In his painting, artist Smith has pictured this particular warrior as being female, and obviously venturing into the lower caverns definitely in search of adventure and battle with the electrical lizards.

Armed with a long spear with sharp hooks at the end, and grounded by a wire to prevent being shocked by the lizards, the tactic obviously is to impale the lizard, keep it at a respectable distance, and then cut it to pieces with the main weapon, a sharp sword. Since the warrior here is being attacked electrically also, it seems certain that the metal suits are insulated against shock, and certainly the whole is grounded through the feet. The lizards probably also serve as a food supply.

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READERS' PRIZE CORNER

EFFECTIVE with this issue, this department will be discontinued. FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, as its part in the war effort, has voluntarily reduced its number of issues to a quarterly basis to help alleviate a serious paper shortage which is dangerous to the war manufacturing effort. Thus many of our readers are unable to participate through inability to secure copies of the magazine.

Our prize winning entry for the June issue was submitted by:

Marijane Nuttall,
2936 Ulric Street,
San Diego 10, California

Our check for $10.00 has gone to her with our congratulations on a nicely expressed opinion of our magazine.

NEW SOURCE OF COPPER

SOME years ago a man by the name of Jim Lefad who lived in Montana, threw some old tin cans into a stream of mine water that flowed near his house. The following day he discovered that where the tin cans had once been now rested a mass of almost pure copper. Realizing the value of his discovery, he contracted for all the mine water and made a fortune.

Today this simple process is expected to yield over 2,000 tons of copper each month—copper that once would have gone to waste. Tin cans are collected from housewives and restaurants and then taken to plants where they are cleaned and cut up before being sent to the copper mines.

The tin can shreds are then placed in the mine water which is a bluish color from the copper sulfate it contains. The iron and tin react chemically with the copper sulfate and the sulfate iron, possessing a greater affinity for the iron and tin than it does for the copper, combines with them to form iron sulfate thus freeing the cupper. The copper then plates on the can, which in turn dissolves, and soon what was once a tin can is now a copper one.

The marvelous feature of this process is that no essential products are wasted. The tin cans can first be sent to detinning plants which only remove about 50% of the tin and leave the rest of the can worthless for any further war work. This residue is ideal for reclaiming copper, however, and can do much to aid our war effort.

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HOW ANIMALS CURE THEIR ILLS

BIRDS and animals appear to know just what herbs will cure what ills. The Indians and our ancestors learned the facts of medicine by observing what plants were sought out by animals suffering from wounds, fever, alimentary disturbances; by watching a bear grubbing for the roots of fern; by noting how the wild turkey, during a rainy spell, compels her babies to eat the leaves of the spicebush; by seeing the wolf, bitten by a rattler, confidently chewing snakeroot.

Both birds and animals bathe regularly to rid their bodies not only of parasites but the possible sources of infection. These baths are of many varieties—water, sun, mud and dust. In the Yellowstone, old grizzly bears use the hot sulphur baths. It is an almost daily habit of such game birds as the quail and wild turkeys to take dust baths to discourage insects.

If birds or animals are caught in a trap, or so injured that a leg dangles because of a broken bone, they do not hesitate to perform an amputation.

Far more remarkable than the heroic self-amputation of a limb is the care given the wound. A muskrat will completely cover such a wounded part with hemlock gum, in this way excluding dirt and germs that might lurk in the water in which he swims. Bears also smear their wounds with spruce or hemlock resin, or occasionally with clay. The chimpanzee, the orang-outang or the gorilla, when wounded, will attempt to stanch the flow of blood with its hands, and will then close the hole with packings of astringent aromatic leaves.

A woodcock with a broken leg will apply to the injured member a splint of clay, sometimes reinforced with fibrous roots. When a wild creature is injured it first seeks solitude and complete retirement. Then, besides giving careful attention to its external wound, it takes internal care. It may induce vomiting; it will almost certainly take a laxative. Members of the canine and feline families, when below par or in physical distress, eat green grass. Wild bears eat berries and roots that are cathartic in their effect.

An animal affected with fever always hunts up an airy, shady place near water, and remains quiet, eating very little and drinking often until it recovers.

Female birds need lime to form eggshells, and it is a common thing to see even birds of the uplands in mating season resort to places where shellfish are found. They have to have lime and they know where to get it.

Sick or wounded wild creatures resort to the ancient remedies of nature: medicines, pure air and complete relaxation. It is marvelous to see their capacity to heal themselves and the majestic faith with which they undertake their self-healing.

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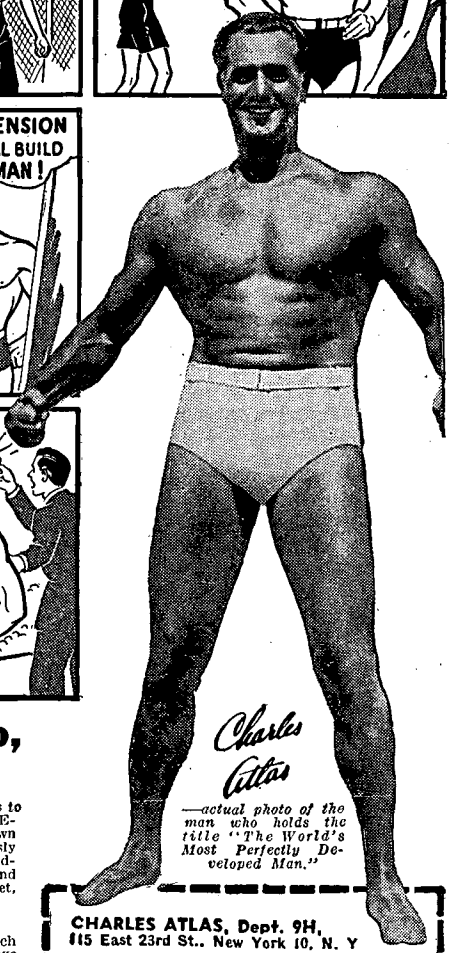
HOW A 97-Lb. WEAKLING Became the "WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN"

The inspiring story of CHARLES ATLAS



Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I Can Make You a New Man, Too, In Only 15 Minutes a Day!

If you're the way I USED to be—if you are skinny and feel only half-alive—if the better jobs pass you by—if you're in the service, but are being "pushed around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—and if you want a HE-MAN's body—then give me just 15 minutes a day!

I'll PROVE you can have a build you'll be PROUD of; *"Dynamic Tension"* will do it for *you*, too! *That's* how I changed my own build into such perfect proportions that famous sculptors and artists have paid me to pose for them. My body won me the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I can give you solid, beautiful, USEFUL muscle wherever YOU want it!

"DYNAMIC TENSION" Does It

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I give you *no* gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You simply utilize the UNDEVELOPED muscle-power in your own God-given body — almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY. And it's so easy—my secret, *"Dynamic Tension,"* does the trick!

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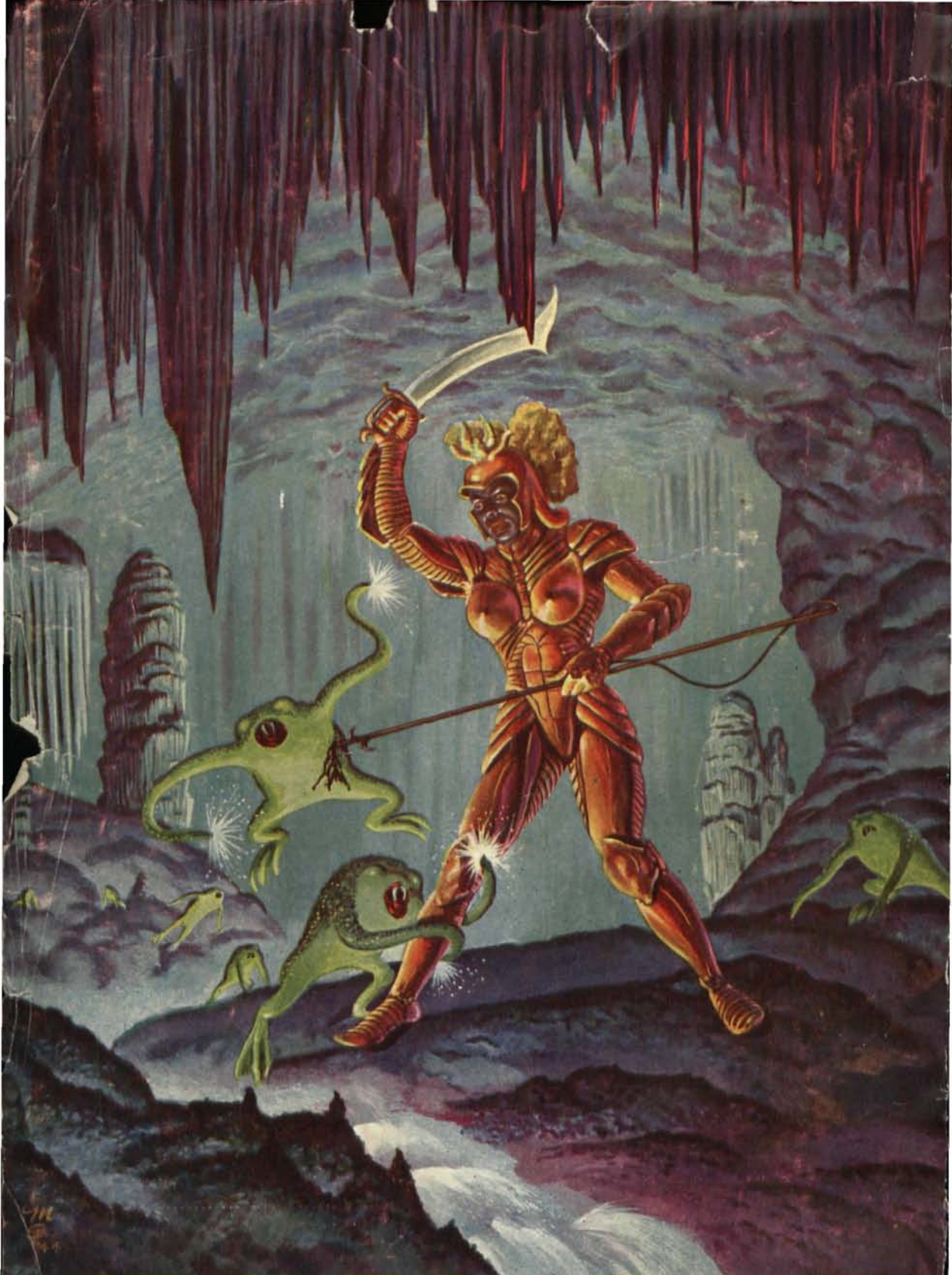

WARRIORS of OTHER WORLDS – SATURN

Pictured here is a battle between an armored feminine fighter of Saturn and the electrical "bloodsucker" warrior of the weird and wonderful sapphire caverns of Saturn's interior. **(See page 208)**

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